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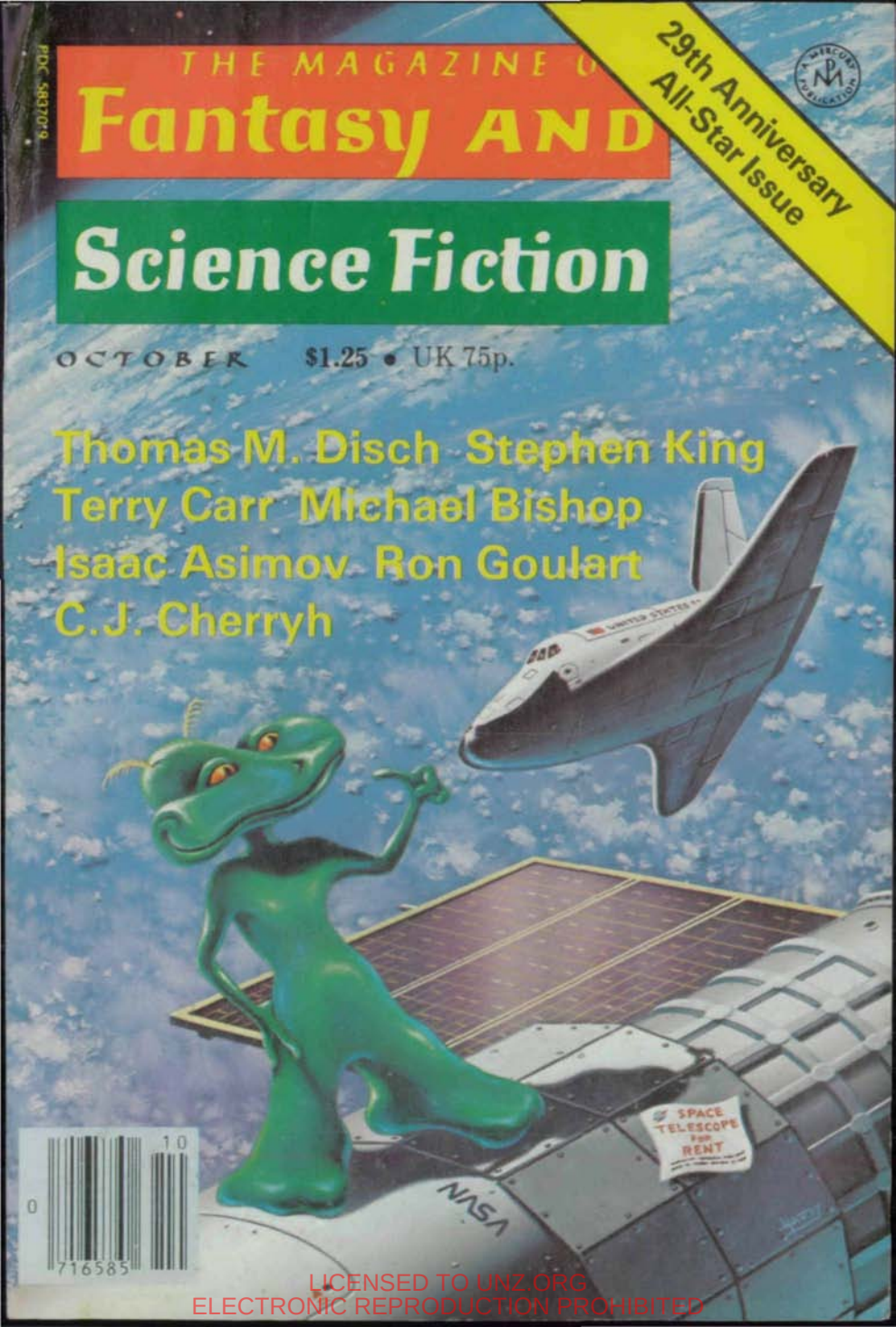

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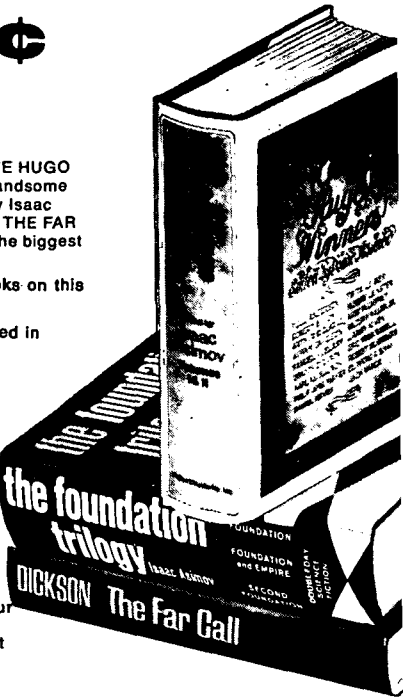

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NOVELETS

THE MAN WHO HAD NO IDEA	**THOMAS M. DISCH**	**5**
THE GUNSLINGER	**STEPHEN KING**	**52**
EFFIGIES	**MICHAEL BISHOP**	**106**

SHORT STORIES

CASSANDRA	**C. J. CHERRYH**	**41**
A CLONE AT LAST	**BILL PRONZINI and BARRY N. MALZBERG**	**50**
PULLING THE PLUG	**RON GOULART**	**94**
VIRRA	**TERRY CARR**	**141**

DEPARTMENTS

BOOKS	**ALGIS BUDRYS**	**34**
CARTOON	**GAHAN WILSON**	**49**
FILMS: *Fantasia*	**BAIRD SEARLES**	**91**
SCIENCE: *Toward Zero*	**ISAAC ASIMOV**	**131**
LETTERS		**158**

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Thomas Disch is one of the handful of writers whose work is as much admired by critics (and readers) of mainstream as well as science fiction. He wrote six fine stories for F&SF in the 1960's. Since then he has published poetry (The Right Way to Figure Plumbing), *an anthology.* Bad Moon Rising, *and three remarkable novels,* The Genocides (*1964*), Camp Concentration (*1968*) *and* 334. *He has just completed a new sf novel,* On Wings of Song.

The Man Who Had No Idea

by THOMAS M. DISCH

At first he'd assumed that he'd failed. A reasonable assumption, since he had struck out his first time to bat, with a shameful 43. But when two weeks had gone by and there was still no word from the Board of Examiners, he wondered if maybe he'd managed to squeak through. He didn't see how he could have. The examiner, a wizened, white-haired fuddy-duddy whose name Barry instantly forgot, had been hostile and aggressive right from the word go, telling Barry that he thought his handshake was too sincere. He directed the conversation first to the possible dangers of excessive sunbathing, which was surely an oblique criticism of Barry's end-of-August tan and the leisure such a tan implied, then started in on the likelihood that dolphins were as intelligent as people. Barry, having entered the cubicle resolved to stake all his chips on a tactic of complete candor, had said, one, he was too young to worry about skin cancer and, two, he had no interest in animals except as meat. This started the examiner off on the psychic experiences of some woman he'd read about in *Reader's Digest.* Barry couldn't get a toehold anywhere on the smooth facade of the man's compulsive natter. He got the feeling, more and more, that *he* was keeping score and the old fart was being tested, an attitude that did not bode well. Finally, with ten minutes left on the clock, he'd just up and left, which was not, strictly speaking, a violation. It did imply that some kind of closure had been achieved, which definitely was not the case; he'd panicked, pure and simple. A fiasco from which he'd naturally feared the worst in the

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form of a letter addressed to Dear Applicant. ("We regret to inform you, etc....") But possibly the old fart had been making things deliberately difficult, testing him, possibly his reactions hadn't been that entirely inappropriate. Possibly he'd passed.

When another two weeks went by without the Board of Examiners saying boo, he couldn't stand the suspense any longer and went down to Center St. to fill out a form that asked basically where did he stand. A clerk coded the form and fed it into the computer. The computer instructed Barry to fill out another form, giving more details. Fortunately he'd brought the data the computer wanted, so he was able to fill out the second form on the spot. After a wait of less than ten minutes, his number lighted up on the board and he was told to go to Window 28.

Window 28 was the window that issued licenses: he had passed!

"I passed," he announced incredulously to the clerk at the window.

The clerk had the license with his name on it, Barry Riordan, right there in her hand. She inserted it into the slot of a gray machine which responded with an authoritative *chunk*. She slid the validated license under the grille.

"Do you know — I still can't believe it. This is *my* license: that's really incredible."

The clerk tapped the shut-up button pinned on the neckband of her T-shirt.

"Oh. Sorry, I didn't notice. Well ... thanks."

He smiled at her, a commiserating guilty smile, and she smiled back, a mechanical next-please smile.

He didn't look at the license till he was out on the street. Stapled to the back of it was a printed notice:

IMPORTANT

Due to the recent systems overload error, your test results of August 24 have been erased. Therefore, in accordance with Bylaw 9(c), Section XII, of the Revised Federal Communications Act, you are being issued a Temporary License, valid for three months from the date of issue, subject to the restrictions set forth in Appendix II of the Federal Communications Handbook (18th edition).

You may reapply for another examination at any time. An examination score in or above the eighth percentile will secure the removal of all restrictions, and you will immediately receive your Permanent License. A score in the sixth or seventh percentile will not affect the validity of your Temporary License, though its expiration date may be extended by this means for a period of up to three months. A

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score in the fifth percentile or below will result in the withdrawal of your Temporary License.

Holders of a Temporary License are advised to study Chapter Nine ("The Temporary License") in the Federal Communications Handbook. Remember that direct, interactive personal communications are one of our most valuable heritages. Use your license wisely. Do not abuse the privilege of free speech.

So in fact he hadn't passed the exam. Or maybe he had. He'd never find out.

His first elation fizzled out and he was left with his usual flattened sense of personal inconsequence. Tucking the license into his ID folder, he felt like a complete charlatan, a nobody pretending to be a somebody. If he'd scored in the first percentile, he'd have been issued this license the same as if he'd scored in the tenth. And he knew with a *priori* certainty that he hadn't done that well. The most he'd hoped for was another seven points, just enough to top him over the edge, into the sixth percentile. Instead he'd had dumb luck.

Not to worry, he advised himself. The worst is over. You've got your license. How you got it doesn't matter.

Oh, yeah, another and less friendly inward voice replied. Now all you need are three endorsements. Lots of luck.

Well, I'll *get* them, he insisted, hoping to impress the other voice with the authenticity and vitality of his self-confidence. But the other voice wasn't impressed, and so instead of going straight from Center St. to the nearest speakeasy to celebrate, he took the subway home and spent the evening watching first a fascinating documentary on calcium structures and then Celebrity Circus, with Willy Marx. Willy had four guests: a famous prostitute, a tax accountant who had just published his memoirs, a comedian who did a surrealistic skit about a speakeasy for five-year-olds, and a novelist with a speech impediment who got into an argument with the comedian about whether his skit was essentially truthful or unjustifiably cruel. In the middle of their argument Barry came down with a murderous headache, took two aspirins, and went to bed. Just before he fell asleep, he thought: I could call them and tell them what *I* thought.

But what did he think?

He didn't know.

That, in a nutshell, was Barry's problem. At last he had his license and could talk to anyone he wanted to talk to, but he didn't know what to talk *about*. He had no ideas of his own. He agreed with anything anyone said. The skit had been

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both essentially truthful *and* unjustifiably cruel. Too much sunbathing probably was dangerous. Porpoises probably were as smart as people.

Fortunately for his morale, this state of funk did not continue long. Barry didn't let it. The next night he was off to Partyland, a 23rd St. speakeasy that advertised heavily on late-night TV. As he approached the froth of electric lights cantilevered over the entrance, Barry could feel the middle of his body turning hollow with excitement, his throat and tongue getting tingly.

There was only a short line, and in a moment he was standing in front of the box office window. "Ring?" the window asked. He looked at the price list. "Second," he said, and slid his Master Charge into the appropriate slot. "License, please," said the window, winking an arrow that pointed at another slot. He inserted his license into the other slot, a bell went ding, and *mira!* He was inside Partyland, ascending the big blue escalator up to his first first-hand experience of direct, interactive personal communication. Not a classroom exercise, not a therapy session, not a job briefing, not an ecumenical agape, but an honest-to-god conversation, spontaneous, unstructured, and all his own.

The usher who led him to his seat in the second ring sat down beside him and started to tell him about a Japanese department store that covered an entire sixteen and a half acres, had thirty-two restaurants, two movie theaters, and a children's playground.

"That's fascinating, isn't it?" the usher concluded, after setting forth further facts about this remarkable department store.

"I suppose it is," Barry said noncommittally. He couldn't figure out why the usher wanted to tell him about a department store in Japan.

"I forget where I read about it," the usher said. "In some magazine or other. Well, mix in, enjoy yourself, and if you want to order anything, there's a console that rolls out from this end table." He demonstrated.

The usher continued to hover, smiling, over his chair. Finally Barry realized he was waiting for a tip. Without any idea of what was customary, he gave him a dollar, which seemed to do the trick.

He sat there in his bulgy sponge of a chair, grateful to be alone and able to take in the sheer size and glamor of the place. Partyland was an endless middle-class living room, a panorama of all that was gracious, tasteful, and posh. At least from here in the second ring it *seemed* endless. It had a seating capacity, according to its ads, of

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780, but tonight wasn't one of its big nights and a lot of the seats were empty.

At intervals that varied unpredictably the furniture within this living room would rearrange itself, and suddenly you would find yourself face-to-face with a new conversational partner. You could also, for a few dollars more, hire a sofa or armchair that you could drive at liberty among the other chairs, choosing your partners rather than leaving them to chance. Relatively few patrons of Partyland exercised this option, since the whole point of the place was that you could just sit back and let your chair do the driving.

The background music changed from Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* to a Sondheim medley, and all the chairs in Barry's area suddenly lifted their occupants up in the air and carried them off, legs dangling, to their next conversational destination. Barry found himself sitting next to a girl in a red velvet evening dress with a hat of paper feathers and polyhedrons. The band of the hat said, "I'm a Partyland Smartypants."

"Hi," said the girl in a tone intended to convey a wordly-wise satiety but achieved no more than blank anomie. "What's up?"

"Terrific, just terrific," Barry replied with authentic warmth. He'd always scored well at this preliminary stage of basic communication, which was why, at the time, he'd so much resented his examiner's remark about his handshake. There was nothing phoney about his handshake, and he knew it.

"I like your shoes," she said.

Barry looked down at his shoes. "Thanks."

"I like shoes pretty much generally," she went on. "I guess you could say I'm a kind of shoe freak." She snickered wanly.

Barry smiled, at a loss.

"But yours are particularly nice. How much did you pay for them, if you don't mind my asking?"

Though he minded, he hadn't the gumption to say so. "I don't remember. Not a lot. They're really nothing special."

"*I* like them," she insisted. Then, "My name's Cinderella. What's yours?"

"Is it really?"

"Really. You want to see my ID?"

"Mm."

She dug into her ID folder, which was made of the same velvet as her dress, and took out her license. It was blue, like his (a Temporary License), and, again like his, there was a staple in the upper left-hand corner.

"See?" she said. "Cinderella B. Johnson. It was my mother's idea. My mother had a really weird sense

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of humor sometimes. She's dead now, though. Do you like it?"

"Like what?"

"My name."

"Oh, yeah, sure."

"Because some people don't. They think it's affected. But I can't help the name I was born with, can I?"

"I was going to ask you —"

Her face took on the intent, yet mesmerized look of a quiz show contestant. "Ask, ask."

"The staple on your license — why is it there?"

"What staple?" she countered, becoming in an instant rigid with suspicion, like a hare that scents a predator.

"The one on your license. Was there something attached to it originally?"

"Some notice ... I don't know. How can I remember something like that? Why do you ask?"

"There's one like it on mine."

"So? If you ask me, this is a damned stupid topic for a conversation. Aren't you going to tell me *your* name?"

"Uh ... Barry."

"Barry what?"

"Barry Riordan."

"An Irish name: that explains it then."

He looked at her questioningly.

"That must be where you got your gift of gab. You must have kissed the Blarney stone."

She's crazy, he thought.

But crazy in a dull, not an interesting way. He wondered how long they'd have to go on talking before the chairs switched round again. It seemed such a waste of time talking to another temp, since he could only get the endorsements he needed from people who held Permanent Licenses. Of course, the practice was probably good for him. You can't expect to like everyone you meet, as the Communications Handbook never tired of pointing out, but you can always try and make a good impression. Someday you'd meet someone it was crucial to hit it off with and your practice would pay off.

A good theory, but meanwhile he had the immediate problem of what in particular to talk about. "Have you heard about the giant department store in Japan?" he asked her. "It covers sixteen acres."

"Sixteen and a half," she corrected. "You must read *Topic* too."

"Mm."

"It's a fascinating magazine. I look at it almost every week. Sometimes I'm just too busy, but usually I skim it, at least."

"Busy doing ...?"

"Exactly." She squinted across the vast tasteful expanse of Partyland, then stood up and waved. "I think I've *recognized* someone," she said excitedly, preening her

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paper feathers with her free hand. Far away, someone waved back.

Cinderella broke one of the polyhedrons off her hat and put it on her chair. "So I'll remember which it is," she explained. Then, contritely, "I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all."

Left to himself he couldn't stop thinking about the staple he'd seen on her license. It was like the seemingly insignificant clue in a detective story from which the solution to the whole mystery gradually unfolds. For didn't it strongly suggest that she too had been given the benefit of the doubt, that she'd got her license not because her score entitled her to it, but thanks to Bylaw 9(c), Section XII? The chagrin of being classified in the same category with such a nitwit! Partyland was probably *full* of people in their situation, all hoping to connect with some bonafide Permanent License holder, instead of which they went around colliding with each other.

A highly depressing idea, but he did not on that account roll out the console to select a remedy from the menu. He knew from long experience that whatever could make him palpably happier was also liable to send him into a state of fugue in which conversation in the linear sense became next to impossible. So he passed the time till the next switchover by working out, in his head, the square roots of various five-digit numbers. Then, when he had a solution, he'd check it on his calculator. He'd got five right answers when his chair reared up, god bless it, and bore him off toward.... Would it be the couple chained, wrist to wrist, on the blue settee? No, at the last moment, his chair veered left and settled down in front of an unoccupied bentwood rocker. A sign in the seat of the rocker said: "I feel a little sick. Back in five minutes."

Barry was just getting used to the idea of going on to six-digit figures when a woman in a green sofa wheeled up to him and asked what kind of music he liked.

"Any kind, really."

"Any or none, it amounts to much the same thing."

"No, honestly. Whatever is playing I usually like it. What are they playing here? I like that."

"Muzak," she said dismissively.

It was, in fact, still the Sondheim medley, but he let that pass. It wasn't worth an argument.

"What do you do?" she demanded.

"I simulate a job that Citibank is developing for another corporation, but only on an auxiliary basis. Next year I'm supposed to start full-time."

She grimaced. "You're new at Partyland, aren't you?"

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He nodded. "First time tonight. In fact, this is my first time ever in any speakeasy. I just got my license yesterday."

"Well, welcome to the club." With a smile that might as well have been a sneer. "I suppose you're looking for endorsements?"

Not from you, he wanted to tell her. Instead he looked off into the distance at the perambulations of a suite of chairs in another ring. Only when all the chairs had settled into place did he refocus on the woman in the foreground. He realized with a little zing of elation that he had just administered his first snub!

"What did Freddy say when you came in?" she asked in a conspiratorial if not downright friendly tone. (His snub had evidently registered.)

"Who is Freddy?"

"The usher who showed you to your seat. I saw him sit down and talk with you."

"He told me about some Japanese department store."

She nodded knowingly. "Of course — I should have known. Freddy shills for *Topic* magazine and that's one of their featured stories this week. I wonder what they pay him. Last week their cover story was about Ireina Khokolovna, and all Freddy could talk about was Ireina Khokolovna."

"Who is Ireina Khokolovna?" he asked.

She hooted a single derisory hoot. "I thought you said you liked music!"

"I do," he protested. But, clearly, he had just failed a major test. With a sigh of weariness and a triumphant smile, the woman rotated her sofa around one hundred and eighty degrees and drove off in the direction of the couple chained together on the blue settee.

The couple rose in unison and greeted her with cries of "Maggie!" and "Son of a gun!" It was impossible for Barry, sitting so nearby and having no one to talk to himself, to avoid eavesdropping on their conversation, which concerned (no doubt as a rebuke to his ignorance) Ireina Khokolovna's latest *superb* release from Deutsche Grammophon. She was at her best in Schumann, her Wolf was *comme ci, comme ça.* Even so, Khokolovna's Wolf was miles ahead of Adriana Motta's, or even Gwyneth Batterham's, who, for all her real intelligence, was developing a distinct wobble in her upper register. Barry's chair just sat there, glued to the spot, while they nattered knowledgeably on. He wished he were home watching Willy Marx — or anywhere but Partyland.

"Mine's Ed," said the occupant of the bentwood rocker, a young man of Barry's own age, build, and hair style.

"Pardon?" said Barry.

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"I said," he said, with woozy precision, "my name is Ed."

"Oh. Mine's Barry. How are you, Ed?"

He held out his hand. Ed shook it gravely.

"You know, Barry," Ed said, "I've been thinking about what you were saying, and I think the whole problem is *cars*. Know what I mean?"

"Elaborate," Barry suggested.

"Right. The thing about cars is.... Well, I live in Elizabeth across the river, right? So any time I come here I've got to drive, right? Which you might think was a drag, but in fact I always feel terrific. You know?"

Barry nodded. He didn't understand what Ed was saying in any very specific way, but he knew he agreed with him.

"I feel ... free. If that doesn't seem too ridiculous. Whenever I'm driving my car."

"What have you got?" Barry asked.

"A Toyota."

"Nice. Very nice."

"I don't think I'm unique that way," said Ed.

"No, I wouldn't say so."

"Cars *are* freedom. And so what all this talk about an energy crisis boils down to is —" He stopped short. "I think I'm having a fugue."

"I think maybe you are. But that's all right. I do too. It'll pass."

"Listen, what's your name?"

"Barry," Barry said. "Barry Riordan."

Ed held out his hand. "Mine's Ed. Say, are you trying to pick up an endorsement?"

Barry nodded. "You too?"

"No. In fact, I think I've still got one left. Would you like it?"

"Jesus," said Barry. "Yeah, sure."

Ed took out his ID folder, took his license from the folder, tickled the edge of the endorsement sticker from the back of the license with his fingernail, and offered it to Barry.

"You're sure you want me to have this?" Barry asked, incredulous, with the white curlicue of the sticker dangling from his fingertip.

Ed nodded. "You remind me of somebody."

"Well, I'm awfully grateful. I mean you scarcely know me."

"Right," said Ed, nodding more vigorously. "But I liked what you were saying about cars. That made a lot of sense."

"You know," Barry burst out in a sudden access of confessional bonhomie, "I feel confused *most* of the time."

"Right."

"But I can never express it. Everything I *say* seems to make more sense than what I can feel inside of me."

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"Right, right."

The music changed from the Sondheim medley to the flip side of *The Four Seasons,* and Barry's chair lifted him up and bore him off toward the couple in the blue settee, while Ed, limp in the bentwood rocker, was carried off in the opposite direction.

"Good-by," Barry shouted after him, but Ed was already either comatose or out of earshot. "And thanks again!"

The MacKinnons introduced themselves. His name was Jason. Hers was Michelle. They lived quite nearby, on West 28th, and were interested, primarily, in the television shows they'd seen when they were growing up, about which they were very well-informed. Despite a bad first impression, due to his associating them with Maggie of the green sofa, Barry found himself liking the MacKinnons enormously, and before the next switchover he put his chair in the LOCK position. They spent the rest of the evening together, exchanging nostalgic tidbits over coffee and slices of Partyland's famous pineapple pie. At closing time he asked if they would either consider giving him an endorsement. They said they would have, having thoroughly enjoyed his company, but unfortunately they'd both used up their quota for that year. They seemed genuinely sorry, but he felt it had been a mistake to ask.

His first endorsement proved to have been beginner's luck. Though he went out almost every night to a different speakeasy and practically lived at Partyland during the weekends, when it was at its liveliest, he never again had such a plum fall in his lap. He didn't get within sniffing distance of his heart's desire. Most people he met were temps, and the few Permanent License holders inclined to be friendly to him invariably turned out, like the MacKinnons, to have already disposed of their allotted endorsements. Or so they said. As the weeks went by and anxiety mounted, he began to be of the cynical but widely held opinion that many people simply removed the stickers from their licenses so it would *seem* they'd been used. According to Jason MacKinnon, a completely selfless endorsement, like his from Ed, was a rare phenomenon. Quid pro quos were the general rule, in the form either of cash on the barrel or services rendered. Barry said (jokingly, of course) that he wouldn't object to bartering his virtue for an endorsement, or preferably two, to which Michelle replied (quite seriously) that unfortunately she did not know anyone who might be in the market for Barry's particular type. Generally, she observed, it was *younger* people who got their endorsements by putting out.

Just out of curiosity, Barry won-

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dered aloud, what kind of cash payment were they talking about? Jason said the standard fee, a year ago, for a single sticker had been a thousand dollars; two and half for a pair, since people with two blanks to fill could be presumed to be that much more desperate. Due however to a recent disproportion between supply and demand, the going price for a single was now seventeen hundred; a double, a round four thousand. Jason said he could arrange an introduction at that price, if Barry were interested.

"I will tell you," said Barry, "what you can do with your stickers."

"Oh, now," said Michelle placatingly. "We're still your *friends,* Mr. Riordan, but business is business. If it were our own *personal* stickers we were discussing, we wouldn't *hesitate* to give you an endorsement absolutely *gratis.* Would we, Jason?"

"Of course not, no question."

"But we're middlemen, you see. We have only limited flexibility in the terms we can offer. Say, fifteen hundred."

"And three and a half for the pair," Jason added. "And that is a rock-bottom offer. You won't do better anywhere else."

"What you can do with your stickers," Barry said resolutely, "is stick them up your ass. Your asses, rather."

"I wish you wouldn't take that attitude, Mr. Riordan," said Jason in a tone of sincere regret. "We do like you, and we have enjoyed your company. If we didn't, we would certainly not be offering this opportunity."

"Bullshit," said Barry. It was the first time he'd used an obscenity conversationally, and he brought it off with great conviction. "You knew when my license would expire, and you've just been stringing me along, hoping I'd get panicky."

"We have been *trying,*" said Michelle, "to help."

"Thanks. I'll help myself."

"How?"

"Tomorrow I'm going back to Center St. and take the exam again."

Michelle MacKinnon leaned across the coffee table that separated the blue settee from Barry's armchair and gave him a sound motherly smack on the cheek. "Wonderful! That's the way to meet a challenge — head on! You're bound to pass. After all, you've had three months of practice. You've become much more fluent these past months."

"Thanks." He got up to go.

"Hey —" Jason grabbed Barry's hand and gave it an earnest squeeze. "Don't forget, if you *do* get your Permanent License —"

"When he gets it," Michelle amended.

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"Right — *when* you get it, you know where you can find us. We're always here on the same settee."

"You two are unbelievable," Barry said. "Do you honestly think I'd sell you my endorsements? Assuming —" He knocked on the varnished walnut coffee table. "— I pass my exam."

"It is safer," Michelle said, "to work through a professional introduction service than to try and peddle them on your own. Even though everyone breaks it, the law is still the law. Individuals operating on their own are liable to get caught, since they don't have an arrangement with the authorities. We do. That's why, for instance, it would do you no good to report us to the Communications Control Office. Others have done so in the past, and it did *them* no good."

"None of them ever got a Permanent License, either," Jason added, with a twinkle of menace.

"That, I'm sure, was just coincidence," said Michelle. "After all, we're speaking of only two cases, and neither of the individuals in question was particularly bright. Bright people wouldn't be so quixotic, would they?" She underlined her question with a Mona Lisa smile, and Barry, for all his indignation and outrage, couldn't keep from smiling back. Anyone who could drop a word like 'quixotic' into the normal flow of conversation and make it seem so natural couldn't be all wrong.

"Don't worry," he promised, tugging his hand out of Jason's. "I'm not the quixotic type."

But when he said it, it sounded false. It wasn't fair.

Barry was as good as his word and went to Center St. the very next morning to take his third exam. The computer assigned him to Marvin Kolodny, Ph.D. in cubicle 183. The initials worried him. He could have coped, this time, with the old fuddy-duddy he'd had last August, but a Ph.D? It seemed as though they were raising the hurdles each time he came around the track. But his worries evaporated the moment he was in the cubicle and saw that Marvin Kolodny was a completely average young man of twenty-four. His averageness was even a bit unsteady, as though he had to think about it, but then most twenty-four-year-olds are self-conscious in just that way.

It's always a shock the first time you come up against some particular kind of authority figure — a dentist, a psychiatrist, a cop — who is younger than you are, but it needn't lead to disaster as long as you let the authority figure know right from the start that you intend to be deferential, and this was a quality that Barry conveyed without trying.

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"Hi," said Barry, with masterful deference. "I'm Barry Riordan."

Marvin Kolodny responded with a boyish grin and offered his hand. An American flag had been tattooed on his right forearm. On a scroll circling the flagpole was the following inscription:

Let's All
Overthrow
the United States
Government
by Force &
Violence

On his other forearm there was a crudely executed rose with his name underneath: Marvin Kolodny, PhD.

"Do you mean it?" Barry asked, marveling over Marvin's tattoo as they shook hands. He managed to ask the question without in the least seeming to challenge Marvin Kolodny's authority.

"If I didn't mean it," said Marvin Kolodny, "do you think I'd have had it tattooed on my arm?"

"I suppose not. It's just so ... unusual."

"I'm an unusual person," said Marvin Kolodny, leaning back in his swivel chair and taking a large pipe from the rack on his desk.

"But doesn't *that* idea —" Barry nodded at the tattoo. "— conflict with your having this particular job? Aren't you part of the U.S. Government yourself?"

"Only for the time being. I'm not suggesting that we overthrow the government *tomorrow*. A successful revolution isn't possible until the proletariat becomes conscious of their oppressions, and they can't become conscious of anything until they are as articulate as their oppressors. Language and consciousness aren't independent processes, after all. Talking is thinking turned inside-out. No more, no less."

"And which am I?"

"How's that?"

"Am I a proletarian or an oppressor?"

"Like most of us these days, I would say you're probably a little of each. Are you married, uh ..." (He peeked into Barry's file.) "'... Barry?"

Barry nodded.

"Then that's one form of oppression right there. Children?"

Barry shook his head.

"Do you live with your wife?"

"Not lately. And even when we were together, we never talked to each other, except to say practical things like 'When is your program going to be over?' Some people just aren't that interested in talking. Debra certainly isn't. That's why —" (He couldn't resist the chance to explain his earlier failures.) "— I did so poorly on my earlier exams. Assuming I *did* get a low score last time, which isn't certain since the

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results were erased. But assuming that I did, that's the reason. I never got any practice. The basic day-to-day conversational experiences most people have with their spouses never happened in my case."

Marvin Kolodny frowned — an ingratiating, boyish frown. "Are you sure you're being entirely honest with yourself, Barry? Few people are completely willing to talk about something. We've all got hobbyhorses. What was your wife interested in? Couldn't you have talked about that?"

"In religion, mostly. But she didn't care to talk about it, unless you agreed with her."

"Have you *tried* to agree with her?"

"Well, you see, Dr. Kolodny, what she *believes* is that the end of the world is about to happen. Next February. That's where she's gone now — to Arizona, to wait for it. This is the third time she's taken off."

"Not an easy woman to discourage, by the sound of it."

"I think she really *wants* the world to end. And, also, she *does* like Arizona."

"Have you considered a divorce?" Marvin Kolodny asked.

"No, absolutely not. We're still basically in love. After all, most married couples end up not saying much to each other. Isn't that so? Even before Debra got religious, we weren't in the habit of talking to each other. To tell the truth, Dr. Kolodny, I've never been much of a talker. I think I was put off it by the compulsory talk we had to do in high school."

"That's perfectly natural. I hated compulsory talk myself, though I must admit I was good at it. What about your job, Barry? Doesn't that give you opportunities to develop communication skills?"

"I don't communicate with the public directly. Only with simulations, and their responses tend to be pretty stereotyped."

"Well, there's no doubt that you have a definite communications problem. But I think it's a problem you can lick! I'll tell you what, Barry: officially, I shouldn't tell you this myself, but I'm giving you a score of 65." He held up his hand to forestall an effusion. "Now, let me explain how that breaks down. You do very well in most categories — Affect, Awareness of Others, Relevance, Voice Production, et cetera, but where you do fall down is in Notional Content and Originality. There you could do better."

"Originality has always been my Waterloo," Barry admitted. "I just don't seem to be able to come up with my own ideas. I did have one, though, just this morning on my way here, and I was going to try and slip it in while I was taking the exam, only it never seemed quite

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natural. Have you ever noticed that you never see baby pigeons? All the pigeons you see out on the street are the same size — full-grown. But where do they come from? Where are the little pigeons? Are they hidden somewhere?" He stopped short, feeling ashamed of his idea. Now that it was out in the open it seemed paltry and insignificant, little better than a joke he'd learned by heart, than which there is nothing more calculated to land you in the bottom percentiles.

Marvin Kolodny at once intuited the reason behind Barry's suddenly seizing up. He was in the business, after all, of understanding unspoken meanings and evaluating them precisely. He smiled a sympathetic, mature smile.

"Ideas..." he said, in a slow, deliberate manner, as though each word had to be weighed on a scale before it was put into the sentence. ".... aren't ... things. Ideas — the most authentic ideas — are the natural, effortless result of any vital relationship. Ideas are what happen when people connect with each other creatively."

Barry nodded.

"Do you mind my giving you some honest advice, Barry?"

"Not at all, Dr. Kolodny. I'd be grateful."

"On your G-47 form you say you spend a lot of time at Partyland and similar speakeasies. I realize that's where you did get your first endorsement, but really, don't you think you're wasting your time in that sort of place? It's a tourist trap!"

"I'm aware of that," Barry said, smarting under the rebuke.

"You're not going to meet anyone there but temps and various people who are out to fleece temps. With rare exceptions."

"I know, I know. But I don't know where *else* to go."

"Why not try this place?" Marvin Kolodny handed Barry a printed card, which read:

INTENSITY FIVE
A New Experience in
Interpersonal Intimacy
5 Barrow Street
New York 10014
Members Only

"I'll certainly try it," Barry promised. "But how do I get to be a member?"

"Tell them Marvin sent you."

And that was all there was to it — he had passed his exam with a score just five points short of the crucial eighth percentile. Which was a tremendous accomplishment but also rather frustrating in a way, since it meant he'd come *that* close to not having to bother scouting out two more endorsements. Still, with another three months in which to continue his quest and an introduc-

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tion to Intensity Five, Barry had every reason to be optimistic.

"Thank you, Dr. Kolodny," Barry said, lingering in the doorway of the cubicle. "Thanks terrifically."

"That's all right, Barry. Just doing my job."

"You know ... I wish ... Of course, I know it's not permissible, you being an examiner and all ... but I wish I knew you in a personal way. Truly. You're a very heavy individual."

"Thank you, Barry. I konw you mean that, and I'm flattered. Well, then —" He took his pipe from his mouth and lifted it in a kind of salute. "So long. And Merry Christmas."

Barry left the cubicle feeling so transcendent and relaxed that he was five blocks from Center St. before he remembered that he'd neglected to have his license revalidated at Window 28. As he headed back to the Federal Communications Building, his senses seemed to register all the ordinary details of the city's streets with an unnatural, hyped clarity: the smell of sauerkraut steaming up from a hot dog cart, the glint of the noon sun on the mica mixed into the paving blocks of the sidewalk, the various shapes and colors of the pigeons, the very pigeons, perhaps, that had inspired his so-called idea earlier that day. But it was true, what he'd said. All the pigeons were the same size.

A block south of the Federal Communications Building, he looked up, and there strung out under the cornice of the building was the motto, which he had never noticed before, of the Federal Communications Agency:

PLANNED FREEDOM IS THE ROAD TO LASTING PROGRESS.

So simple, so direct, and yet when you thought about it, almost impossible to understand.

Barrow St. being right in the middle of one of the city's worst slums, Barry had been prepared (he'd thought) for a lesser degree of stateliness and bon ton than that achieved by Partyland, but even so the dismal actuality of Intensity Five went beyond anything he could have imagined. A cavernous one-room basement apartment with bare walls, crackly linoleum over a concrete floor, and radiators that hissed and gurgled ominously without generating a great deal of heat. The furniture consisted of metal folding chairs, most of them folded and stacked, a refreshment stand that sold orange juice and coffee, and a great many free-standing, brimful metal ashtrays. Having already forked out twenty-five dollars upstairs as his membership fee, Barry felt as though he'd been had,

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but since the outlay was nonrefundable, he decided to give the place the benefit of his doubt and loiter awhile.

He had been loitering, alone and melancholy, for the better part of an hour, eavesdropping to his right on a conversation about somebody's drastic need to develop a more effective persona and to his left on a discussion of the morality of our involvement in Mexico, when a black woman in a white nylon jumpsuit and a very good imitation calf-length mink swept into the room, took a quick survey of those present, and sat down, unbelievably, by him!

Quick as a light switch he could feel his throat go dry and his face tighten into a smile of rigid insincerity. He blushed, he trembled, he fainted dead away, but only metaphorically.

"I'm Columbine Brown," she said, as though that offered an explanation.

Did she expect him to recognize her? She was beautiful enough, certainly, to have been someone he ought to recognize, but if he had seen her on TV, he didn't remember. In a way she seemed almost *too* beautiful to be a noted personality, since there is usually something a little idiosyncratic about each of them, so they can be told apart. Columbine Brown was beautiful in the manner not of a celebrity but of a deluxe (but not customized) sports car.

"I'm Barry Riordan," he managed to bring out, tardily.

"Let's put our cards on the table, shall we, Mr. Riordan? I am a Permanent Card holder. What are you?"

"A temp."

"It's fair to assume then that you're here to find an endorsement."

He began to protest. She stopped him with just one omniscient and devastating glance. He nodded.

"Unfortunately, I have used up my quota. However —" She held up a single perfect finger. "— it's almost the New Year. If you're not in a desperate hurry...?"

"Oh, I've got till March."

"I'm not promising anything, you understand. Unless we hit it off. If we do, then fine, you have my endorsement. Fair enough?"

"It's a deal."

"You feel you can trust me?" She lowered her eyes and tried to look wicked and temptress-like, but it was not in the nature of her kind of beauty to do so.

"Anywhere," he replied. "Implicitly."

"Good." As though of its own volition her coat slipped off her shoulders onto the back of the folding chair. She turned her head sideways and addressed the old woman

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behind the refreshment counter. "Evelyn, how about an orange juice." She looked at him. He nodded. "Make it two."

Then, as though they'd been waiting for these preliminaries to be concluded, tears sprang to her eyes. A tremor of heartfelt emotion colored her lovely contralto voice as she said, "Oh Jesus, what am I going to do? I can't take any more! I am just so ... so goddamned wretched! I'd like to kill myself. No, that isn't true. I'm confused, Larry. But I know one thing — I am an *angry* woman and I'm going to start fighting back!"

It would have been inconsiderate to break in upon such testimony by mentioning that his name was not, in fact, Larry. What difference does one letter make, after all?

"Have you ever been to the Miss America Pageant on 42nd St.?" she asked him, drying her eyes.

"I can't say I have. I always mean to, but you know how it is. It's the same with the Statue of Liberty. It's always there, so you never get around to it."

"I'm Miss Georgia."

"No kidding!"

"I have *been* Miss Georgia six nights a week for the last four years, with matinees on Sunday and Tuesday, and do you suppose in all that time that the audience has ever voted for *me* to be Miss America? Ever?"

"*I* would certainly vote for you."

"Never once," she went on fiercely, ignoring his supportiveness. "It's always Miss Massachusetts, or Miss Ohio, who can't do anything but play a damn jew's-harp, if you'll excuse my language, or Miss Oregon, who still can't remember the blocking for *Lovely to Look At,* which she has been dancing since before *I* graduated from high school. There's no one in the whole damn line-up who hasn't been crowned once. Except me."

"I'm sorry to hear it."

"I am a *good* singer. I can tap dance like a house on fire. My balcony scene would break your heart. And I can say objectively that I've got better legs than anyone except, possibly, Miss Wyoming."

"But you've never been Miss America," Barry said sympathetically.

"What do you think that *feels* like, here?" She grabbed a handful of white nylon in the general area of her heart.

"I honestly don't know, Miss ...." (He'd forgotten her last name.) "... Georgia."

"At Intensity Five I'm just plain Columbine, honey. The same as you're just Larry. And not knowing isn't much of an answer. Here I am exposing myself in front of you, and you come back with 'No Opinion.' I don't buy that."

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"Well, to be completely candid, Columbine, it's hard for me to imagine your feeling anything but terrific. To be Miss Georgia and have such a lot of talent — isn't that *enough?* I would have thought you'd be very happy."

Columbine bit her lip, furrowed her brow, and evidenced, in general, a sudden change of heart. "God, Larry — you're right! I've been kidding myself: the pageant isn't my problem — it's my excuse. My problem —" Her voice dropped, her eyes avoided his. "— is timeless and well-known. I fell in love with the wrong man for me. And now it's too late. Would you like to hear a long story, Larry? A long and very unhappy story?"

"Sure. That's what I'm here for, isn't it?"

She smiled a meaningful, unblemished smile and gave his hand a quick, trusting squeeze. "You know, Larry — you're an all-right guy."

Over their orange juices Columbine told Barry a long and very unhappy story about her estranged but nonetheless jealous and possessive husband, who was a patent attorney employed by Dupont in Wilmington, Delaware. Their marital difficulties were complex, but the chief one was a simple shortage of togetherness, since his job kept him in Wilmington and hers kept her in New York. Additionally, her husband's ideal of conversation was very divergent from her own. He enjoyed talking about money, sports, and politics with other men and bottled up all his deeper feelings. She was introspective, outgoing, and warm-hearted.

"It would be all right for a while," she recalled. "But the pressure would build until I had to go out and find someone to talk to. It is a basic human need, after all. Perhaps *the* basic need. I had no choice."

"And then he'd find out, I suppose," said Barry.

She nodded. "And go berserk. It was awful. No one can live that way."

Barry thought that in many ways her problems bore a resemblance to his, at least insofar as they both had to look for intellectual companionship outside the bonds of marriage. But when he began to elaborate upon this insight and draw some interesting parallels between his experience and hers, Columbine became impatient. She did not come right out and tell him that he was in breach of contract, but that was definitely the message conveyed by her glazed inattention. Responsive to her needs, he resisted the impulse to make any further contributions of his own and sat back and did his level best to be a good listener and nothing more.

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When Columbine had finally run the gamut of all her feelings, which included, fear, anger, joy, pain, and an abiding and entirely unreasoning sense of dread, she thanked him, gave him her address and phone number, and said to get in touch in January for his endorsement.

Jubilation, he thought. Bingo. Hallelujah.

But not quite. He still had to get one more endorsement. But now it seemed possible, likely, even inevitable. A matter, merely, of making the effort and reaping the reward.

Dame Fortune had become so well-disposed to him that he got his third endorsement (though in point of hard fact, his second) the very next night. The fated encounter took place at Morone's One-Stop Shopping, a mom-and-pop minigrocery on Sixth Ave. right next to the International Supermarket. Although Morone's charged more for most items, Barry preferred shopping there because it offered such a limited and unchallenging range of choices (cold meats, canned goods, beer, Nabisco cookies) that he never felt intimidated and ashamed of his selections at the check-out counter. He hated to cook, but was that any reason he should be made to feel inadequate? Morone's was made to order for people like Barry, of which there are great numbers.

That night, as he was hesitating between a dinner of Spam and Chef Boy-ar-dee ravioli or Spam and Green Giant corn niblets, the woman who had been standing in front of the frozen food locker suddenly started talking to herself. The Morones looked at each other in alarm. Neither of them were licensed talkers, which was a further attraction of their store, since one's exchanges with them were limited to such basic permissible amenities as "How are you," "Take care," and giving out prices.

What the woman was saying was of a character to suggest that she had just that minute gone crazy. "The pain," she explained calmly to the ice cream section of the freezer, "only comes on when I do this." She stooped closer to the ice cream and winced. "But then it's pure hell. I want to cut my leg off, have a lobotomy, anything to make it stop. Yet I know the problem isn't in my leg at all. It's in my back. Here." She touched the small of her back. "A kind of short circuit. Worse than bending over is twisting sideways. Even turning my head can set it off. Sometimes, when I'm alone, I'll start crying just at the thought of it, at knowing I've become so damned superannuated." She sighed. "Well, it happens to everyone, and I suppose it could be worse. There's no use complaining. Life goes on, as they say."

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Having come round to a sensible, accepting attitude, she turned from the freezer to witness the effect of her outburst on the Morones, who looked elsewhere, and on Barry, who couldn't resist meeting her eyes head-on. Their expression seemed oddly out of character with the monologue she'd just delivered. They were piercing (as against vulnerable) steely-gray eyes that stared defiance from a face all sags and wrinkles. Without the contradiction of such eyes, her face would have seemed ruined and hopeless; with them, she looked just like an ancient centurion in a movie about the Roman Empire.

She grimaced. "No need to panic. It's not an emergency. I'm licensed."

Barry proffered his most harmless smile. "I wasn't even thinking of that."

She didn't smile back. "Then what were you thinking?"

"I guess I was feeling sorry."

To which her reaction was, alarmingly, to laugh.

Feeling betrayed and pissed-off, he grabbed the nearest can of vegetables (beets, he would later discover, and he hated beets) and handed it to Mr. Morone with the can of Spam.

"That it?" Mr. Morone asked.

"A six-pack of Schlitz," he said, quite off the top of his head.

When he left the store with his dinner and the beer in a plastic bag, she was already outside waiting for him. "I wasn't laughing at you, young man," she told him, taking the same coolly aggrieved tone she'd taken toward the ice cream. "I was laughing at myself. Obviously, I *was* asking for pity. So if I should get some, I shouldn't be surprised, should I. My name's Madeline, but my friends call me Mad. You're supposed to laugh."

"Mine's Barry," he said. "Do you drink beer?"

"Oh, I'm not drunk. I discovered long ago that one needn't actually drink in order to have the satisfaction of behaving outrageously."

"I meant, would you like some now, with me? I've got a six-pack."

"Certainly. Barry, you said? You're so *direct* it's almost devious. Let's go to my place. It's only a couple blocks away. You see — I can be direct myself."

Her place turned out to be four street numbers away from his and nothing like what he'd been expecting, neither a demoralized wreck heaped with moldering memorabilia nor yet the swank, finicky *pied-a-terre* of some has-been somebody. It was a plain, pleasant 1½-room apartment that anyone could have lived in and almost everyone did, with potted plants to emphasize the available sunlight and pictures representing various vanished luxuries

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on the wall, the common range of furniture from aspiring to makeshift, and enough ordinary debris to suggest a life being carried on, with normative difficulty, among these carefully cultivated neutralities.

Barry popped the tops off two beer cans and Madeline swept an accumulation of books and papers off a tabletop and onto a many-cushioned bed. They sat down at the table.

"Do you know what it's called?" he asked. "The disease you've got?"

"Sciatica. Which is more a disorder than a disease. Let's not talk about it, okay?"

"Okay, but *you'll* have to think of what we do talk about. I'm no good at coming up with topics for conversation."

"Why is that?"

"No ideas. If other people have ideas, I can bounce off them well enough, but all by itself my mind's a blank. I envy people like you who are able to start talking out of the blue."

"Mm," said Madeline, not unkindly. "It's odd you should put it like that; it's almost a definition of what I do for a living."

"Really, what's that?"

"I'm a poet."

"No kidding. You can make a living by being a poet?"

"Enough to get by."

Barry refused to believe her. Neither the woman nor her apartment corresponded with his preconceptions of poets and the necessarily indigent life they must lead. "Have you ever published a book?" he asked craftily.

"Twenty-two. More than that, if you count limited editions and pamphlets and such." She went over to the bed, rooted among the papers, and returned with a thin, odd-sized paperback. "This is the latest." The front cover said in tasteful powder-blue letters on a ground of dusky cream: MADELINE IS MAD AGAIN: New Poems by Madeline Swain. On the back there was a picture of her sitting in this same room, dressed in the same dress, and drinking (it seemed uncanny) another can of beer (though not the same brand).

Barry turned the book over in his hands, examining the cover and the photo alternately, but would no more have thought of looking inside than of lifting Madeline's skirts to peek at her underclothes. "What's it about?" he asked.

"Whatever I happened to be thinking at the moment I wrote each poem."

That made sense but didn't answer his question. "When do you write them?"

"Generally, whenever people ask me to."

"Could you write a poem right

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now? About what you're thinking?"

"Sure, no trouble." She went to the desk in the corner of the room and quickly wrote the following poem, which she handed to Barry to read:

A Reflection

Sometimes the repetition of what
we have
just said will suggest a new meaning
or possibilities of meaning
we did not at first suppose to be
there.
We think we have understood our
words,
then learn that we have not,
since their essential meaning
only dawns on us the second time
round.

"This is what you were thinking just now?" he asked skeptically.

"Are you disappointed?"

"I thought you'd write something about me."

"Would you like me to do that?"

"It's too late now."

"Not at all."

She went to her desk and returned a moment later with a second poem:

Aubade

I was sorry to hear
That you've got to be going.
But you're not?
Then I'm sorry to hear that.

"What does the title mean?" he asked, hoping it might modify the unfriendly message of the four short lines that followed.

"An aubade is a traditional verse-form that a lover addresses to his (or her) beloved at dawn, when one of them is leaving for work."

He tried to think of a compliment that wouldn't be completely insincere. "Heavy," he allowed at last.

"Oh, I'm afraid it's not much good. I can usually do better. I guess I don't trust you enough. Though you're quite likable; that's another matter."

"Now I'm likable! I thought —" He dangled the poem by one corner. "— you were just hinting that I should leave?"

"Nonsense. You haven't even finished your beer. You *mustn't* hold what I write against me. Poets can't be held responsible for what they say in their poems. We're all compulsive traitors, you know."

Barry said nothing, but his expression must have conveyed his disapproval.

"Now don't be like that. Treason is a necessary part of the job, the way that handling trash cans is a part of being a garbage man. Some poets go to a great deal of trouble to disguise their treacheries; my inclination is to be up-front and betray everyone right from the start."

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"Do you have many friends?" he asked, needlingly.

"Virtually none. Do you think I'd go around talking to myself in grocery stores if I had friends?"

He shook his head, perplexed. "I'll tell you, Madeline, it doesn't make sense to me. Surely if you were nice to other poets, they'd be nice to you, on the basic principle of scratch-my-back."

"Oh, of course. Minor poets do nothing else. They positively swarm. I'd rather be major and lonely, thank you very much."

"Sounds arrogant to me."

"It is. I am. *C'est la vie.*" She took a long, throat-rippling sip of the Schlitz and set her can down on the table, empty. "What I like about you, Barry, is that you manage to say what you think without seeming the least homicidal. Why?"

"Why do I say what I think? It's easiest."

"No: why are you so accommodating to me, when I'm being such a bitch? Are you looking for an endorsement?"

He blushed. "Is it that obvious?"

"Well, as you don't appear to be either a mugger or a rapist, there had to be some reason you followed a dotty old woman home from her latest nervous breakdown. Let's make a deal, shall we?"

"What sort of deal?"

"You stay around and nudge some more poems out of me. I'm feeling the wind in my sails, but I need a muse. If you give me twenty good ideas for poems, I'll give you your endorsement."

Barry shook his head. "Twenty different ideas? Impossible."

"Don't think of them as ideas then, think of them as questions."

"Ten," he insisted. "Ten is a lot."

"Fifteen," she countered.

"All right, but including the two you've already written."

"Done!"

She sat down and waited for Barry to be inspired. "Well?" she inquired, after a long silence.

"I'm trying to think."

He tried to think of what most poems were about. Love seemed the likeliest subject, but he couldn't imagine Madeline, at her age and with her temperament, being in love with anybody. Still, that was her problem. He didn't have to write the poem, only propose it.

"All right," he said. "Write a poem about how much you're in love with me."

She looked miffed. "Don't flatter yourself, young man. I may have inveigled you into my apartment, but I am *not* in love with you."

"Pretend then. And don't make it anything flip like that last one. Make it sad and delicate and use some rhymes."

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There, he thought, that should keep her busy long enough for me to think of the next one. He opened a second beer and took a meditative swallow. Did poets ever write poems about drinking beer? Or was that too general? Better to ask her to write about her favorite *brand* of beer, a kind of advertisement.

By the time she'd finished the sonnet about how much she loved him, he had come up with all twelve other subjects.

1. A poem about her favorite beer, written as though it were an ad.

2. A poem in the form of a Christmas-shopping list.

3. A poem embodying several important long-range economic forecasts.

4. A poem about a rabbit (there was a porcelain rabbit on one of the shelves) suitable to be sung to a baby.

5. A very short poem to be carved on the tombstone of her least favorite president, living or dead.

6. A poem apologizing to the last person she had been especially rude to.

7. A poem for a Get Well card to someone who has sciatica.

8. A poem analyzing her feelings about beets.

9. A poem that skirts all around a secret she's never told anyone and then finally decides to keep it a secret.

10. A poem giving an eyewitness account of something awful happening in Arizona, in February.

11. A poem justifying capital punishment in cases where one has been abandoned by one's lover. (This in its final, expanded form was to become the longest poem in her next collection, "The Ballad of Lucius McGonaghal Sloe," which begins:

I fell head over heels just four
evenings ago
With a girl that I'm sure you all
know,
But I couldn't hold her,
And that's why I sold her,
To Lucius McGonaghal Sloe.

and continues, in a similar vein, for another one hundred thirty-six stanzas.)

12. A poem presenting an affirmative, detailed description of her own face.

Prudently he didn't spring them on her all at once, but waited until she'd finished each one before telling her what the next had to be about. She didn't raise any further objections until he came to Number 8, whereupon she insisted she didn't have any feelings about beets whatsoever. He refused to believe her, and to prove his point he cooked up a quick dinner on her hotplate of Spam and canned beets

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(it was rather late by then, and they were famished). Before she'd had three mouthfuls, the poem started coming to her, and by the time she'd got it into final shape, five years later, it was far and away the best of the lot.

For the next many days Barry didn't speak to a soul. He felt no need to communicate anything to anyone. He had his three endorsements — one from a poet who'd published twenty-two books — and he was confident he could have gone out and got three more a day if he'd needed to. He was off the hook.

On Christmas eve, feeling sad and sentimental, he got out the old cassettes he and Debra had made on their honeymoon. He played them on the TV, one after the other, all through the night, waxing mellower and mellower and wishing she were here. Then, in February, when the world had once again refused to end, she did come home, and for several days it was just as good as anything on the cassettes. They even, for a wonder, talked to each other. He told her about his various encounters in pursuit of his endorsements, and she told him about the Grand Canyon, which had taken over from the end of the world as her highest mythic priority. She loved the Grand Canyon with a surpassing love and wanted Barry to leave his job and go with her to live right beside it. Impossible, he declared. He'd worked eight years at Citibank and accrued important benefits. He accused her of concealing something. Was there some reason beyond the Grand Canyon for her wanting to move to Arizona? She insisted it was strictly the Grand Canyon, that from the first moment she'd seen it she'd forgotten all about Armageddon, the Number of the Beast, and all the other accouterments of the Apocalypse. She couldn't explain: he would have to see it himself. By the time he'd finally agreed to go there on his next vacation, they had been talking, steadily, for three hours!

Meanwhile, Columbine Brown had been putting him off with a variety of excuses and dodges. The phone number she'd given him was her answering service, the address was an apartment building with guard dogs in the lobby and a doorman who didn't talk, or listen. Barry was obliged to wait out on the sidewalk, which wasn't possible, due to a cold wave that persisted through most of January. He left a message at the Apollo Theater, where the pageant was held, giving three different times he would be waiting for her at Intensity Five. She never showed. By mid-February, he'd begun to be alarmed. Early one morning, defying the weather, he posted himself outside

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her building and waited (five miserable hours) till she appeared. She was profusely apologetic, explained that she *did* have his sticker, there was no problem, he shouldn't worry, but she had an appointment she had to get to, in fact she was already late, and so if he'd come back tonight, or better yet (since she had to see somebody after the pageant and didn't know when she'd be home) at this time tomorrow? Thoughtfully, she introduced him to the doorman so he wouldn't have to wait out in the cold.

At this time tomorrow Columbine made another nonappearance, and Barry began to suspect she was deliberately avoiding him. He decided to give her one last chance. He left a message with the doorman saying he would be by to collect his you-know-what at half past twelve the next night. Alternately, she could leave it in an envelope with the doorman.

When he arrived the following evening, the doorman led him down the carpeted corridor, unlocked the elevator (the dogs growled portentously until the doorman said *"Aus!"*), and told him to ring at door 8-C.

It was not Columbine who let him in, but her understudy, Lida Mullens. Lida informed Barry that Columbine had joined her husband in Wilmington, Delaware, and there was no knowing when, if ever, she might return to her post as Miss Georgia. She had not left the promised sticker, and Lida seriously doubted whether she had any left, having heard, through the grapevine, that she'd sold all three of them to an introduction service on the day they came in the mail. With his last gasp of self-confidence Barry asked Lida Mullens whether *she* would consider giving him an endorsement. He promised to pay her back in kind the moment he was issued his own license. Lida informed him airily that she didn't have a license. Their entire conversation had been illegal.

The guilt that immediately marched into his mind and evicted every other feeling was something awful. He knew it was irrational, but he couldn't help it. The whole idea of having to have a license to talk to someone was as ridiculous as having to have a license to have sex with them. Right? Right! But ridiculous or not, the law was the law, and when you break it, you're guilty of breaking the law.

The nice thing about guilt is that it's so easy to repress. Within a day Barry had relegated all recollections of his criminal behavior of the night before to the depths of his subconscious and was back at Intensity Five, waiting for whomever to strike up a conversation. The only person who so much as

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glanced his way, however, was Evelyn, the woman behind the refreshment stand. He went to other speakeasies, but it was always the same story. People avoided him. Their eyes shied away. His vibrations became such an effective repellent that he had only to enter a room in order to empty it of half its custom. Or so it seemed. When one is experiencing failure, it is hard to resist the comfort of paranoia.

With only a week left till his temporary license expired, Barry abandoned all hope and all shame and went back to Partyland with fifteen hundred dollars in cash, obtained from Beneficial Finance.

The MacKinnons were not in their blue settee, and neither Freddy the usher nor Madge of the green sofa could say what had become of them. He flopped into the empty settee with a sense of complete, abject surrender, but so eternally does hope spring that inside of a quarter of an hour he had adjusted to the idea of never being licensed and was daydreaming instead of a life of majestic, mysterious silence on the rim of the Grand Canyon. He rolled out the console and ordered a slice of pineapple pie and some uppers.

The waitress who brought his order was Cinderella Johnson. She was wearing levis and a t-shirt with the word "Princess" in big, glitter-dust letters across her breasts. Her hat said: "Let Tonight Be Your Enchanted Evening at Partyland!"

"Cinderella!" he exclaimed. "Cinderella Johnson! Are you *working* here?"

She beamed. "Isn't it wonderful? I started three days ago. It's like a dream come true."

"Congratulations."

"Thanks." Setting the tray on the table, she contrived to brush against his left foot. "I see you're wearing the same shoes."

"Mm."

"Is something the matter?" she asked, handing him the uppers with a glass of water. "You look gloomy, if you'll forgive my saying so."

"Sometimes it does you good to feel gloomy." One of the pills insisted on getting stuck in his throat. Just like, he thought, a lie.

"Hey, do you mind if I sit down on your couch a minute? I am frazzled. It's a tremendous opportunity, working here, but it does take it out of you."

"Great," said Barry. "Fine. Terrific. I could use some company."

She sat down close to him and whispered into his ear, "If anyone, such as Freddy, for instance, should happen to ask what we were talking about, say it was the New Wooly Look, okay?"

"That's *Topic's* feature story this week?"

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She nodded. "I guess you heard about the MacKinnons."

"I asked, but I didn't get any answers."

"They were arrested, for trafficking, right here on this couch, while they were taking money from the agent that had set them up. There's no way they can wiggle out of it this time. People say how sorry they are and everything, but I don't know: they *were* criminals, after all. What they were doing only makes it harder for the rest of us to get our endorsements honestly."

"I suppose you're right."

"Of course I'm right."

Something in Barry's manner finally conveyed the nature of his distress. The light dawned: "You have *got* your license, haven't you?"

Reluctantly at first, then with the glad, uncloseted feeling of shaking himself loose over a dance floor, Barry told Cinderella of his ups and downs during the past six months.

"Oh, that is so terrible," she commiserated at the end of his tale. "That is so unfair."

"What can you do?" he asked, figuratively.

Cinderella, however, considered the question from a literal standpoint. "Well," she said, "we haven't ever really talked together, not seriously, but you certainly ought to have a license."

"It's good of you to say so," said Barry morosely.

"So — if you'd like an endorsement from me...?" She reached into her back pocket, took out her license, and peeled off an endorsement sticker.

"Oh, no, really, Cinderella...." He took the precious sticker between thumb and forefinger. "I don't deserve this. Why should you go out on a limb for someone you scarcely know?"

"That's okay," she said. "I'm sure you'd have done just the same for me."

"If there is anything I can do in return...?"

She frowned, shook her head vehemently, and then said, "Well ... maybe...."

"Name it."

"Could I have one of your shoes?"

He laughed delightedly. "Have both of them!"

"Thanks, but I wouldn't have room."

He bent forward, undid the laces, pulled off his right shoe, and handed it to Cinderella.

"It's a beautiful shoe," she said, holding it up to the light. "Thank you *so* much."

And that is the end of the story.

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ALGIS BUDRYS

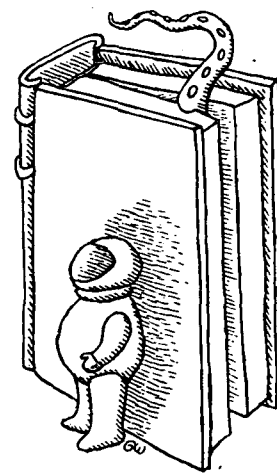
Books

Blind Voices, by Tom Reamy, Berkley/Putnam, $7.95

The Persistence of Vision, by John Varley, Dial Press/James Wade, $9.95

Sorcerers and *Ariel, The Book of Fantasy, Vol. 3*, Ariel Books/Ballantine Books, $7.95 and $6.95, respectively.

Encyclopedia of Science Fiction and Fantasy, Vol. 2, Advent: Publishers, $25.00



Sometimes I think the history of SF in the late 1970s could turn into a necrology. Leigh Brackett and Eric Frank Russell have died since the last time I sat down to write one of these columns, and the fact is that these losses, in particular, represent the termination of careers whose hallmark was ebullience, unabashed entertainment, and reliability, combined with high intelligence and sophistication.

Russell was an uneven talent to some extent, and went through a period of doing the kind of dumb alien/clever Earthman story which is okay once or twice, but whose durability as a theme is fleeting — as Christopher Anvil for some reason continues to demonstrate. But the thing about Russell, as distinguished from his imitator, was that you could count on him to throw you a curve when you least expected it, and come up with a *Sinister Barrier*, or a "Metamorphosite," or "And Then There Were None..." or "Dear Devil," or any one of scores of stories which approached those levels. Any time his byline appeared on a table of contents, you had a very good chance of being intelligently entertained, and there was a little jolt of excitement in anticipating it.

Leigh Brackett we have talked about before. In her case, and in

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the case of her husband, Ed Hamilton, Del Rey Books got a pair of "Best of..." collections into print just before their deaths. The work speaks well for itself, and for Judy-Lynn del Rey's editorial acumen. But that is not the same as having these people still around and working, aside from the loss of their personalities in the SF community.

What we are losing is our experienced craftsmen, at an accelerating rate. The people who wrote for the pulps are going. They were trained in a school unknown to any of the newer writers, and their attitudes were entirely different.

They did not, as young people, feel that they were advancing an art or making places for themselves in the permanent body of literature. They were entertainers, and if they were well above the average in talent and ingenuity, as well as in intelligence, that was not held at any particular premium by the editors and publishers for whom they worked. You got nothing extra for exceeding the necessary minimum, except the appreciation of a few crazy kids who wrote letters to the editor and clumped up in shoestring "conventions" of fifty or sixty adolescents in Woolworth shirts with return Trailways tickets in the pencil pockets.

There are practically none of them left. The great names of the Golden Age — Asimov, Heinlein, and that crew — never worked for the pulps. There is a fine distinction; *Astounding* was a pulp, and part of a chain of pulps, but it was a very special publication with its own stable, who might write a little for *Unknown* and, later, sell an occasional Campbell reject to *Startling* or *Super Science,* but who had not run the gamut of the sports and crime and western and air war periodicals, who did not think of themselves as professional writers, most of them, but as people who sold stories as a form of avocation. Those of us who turned professional in the 1950s never worked for the pulps; we only heard many stories about how it was, and some of us learned from pulp writers. But sometime between 1925 and 1945, even allowing for what World War II did to them, there was a thing called *the* pulps, and there were writers who were trained to write for essentially the same audience that supports Laverne and Shirley and Starsky and Hutch and Clint Eastwood movies, and those writers are all in their sixties and seventies now.

Many of them would not be offended if they were told their work was essentially interchangeable with many another's work, and might as well be forgotten. It was written with the understanding that it would evanesce before the next

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on-sale date. Some of them would be offended. Of that number, most would be wrong to feel that way. Pulp writing was essentially carpentry...good, clean, honest and probably necessary work, most of it, and utilitarian. Only a few rose above that standard. Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Joel Townsley Rogers, Murray Leinster...even if complete, the list would not be long...L. Ron Hubbard, maybe (well, yes, L. Ron Hubbard)...and others I have mentioned here from time to time.

Not many. Not many whose essential training was not toward self-expression, but toward making a story work. Not many whose *first* concern was not felicity of phrase or subtlety of concept or experiment with narrative technique, but, instead, the entertainment of the reader. The best of them were not stupid. Many of them were great readers, appreciating world literature to an extent that would stun the eyebrows off most of the products of modern so-called educations in the arts. Once they had the story working, they found plenty of room to create special effects of impressive sophistication — provided they didn't impede the progress of the story.

And those people are going. Wit, talent, education, energy, intelligence — all of these we have with us, young and vigorous, among an unusually large crop of impressive new writers and a solid backing of veterans yet in their prime. But over the next ten years, or so, we will have altogether lost something we may need very badly. Last year, I pleaded for someone with a tape recorder to go listen to Leigh Brackett. I suppose that instead he settled for a government grant to do a thesis on elements of behavioral psychology in the work of six modern SF writers. Or maybe she contributed an interview with David Gerrold to a fan magazine.

After all, what did any of those old hacks know? We have to keep our priorities straight, right?

Blind Voices will be Tom Reamy's only novel. His physical heart failed while in its early forties. If they were going to find me slumped over my typewriter, I wouldn't be ashamed if something like *Blind Voices* were in it.

This short but substantial book begins with a classic theme — the circus of evil, — arriving, in this case, at an isolated Kansas town on a hot summer's day in the 1920s. Haverstock, the Curator of Haverstock's Traveling Curiosus and Wonder Show is neither Doctor Lao nor Frank Morgan returning from Oz. He is a very nasty man indeed, devious but not subtle, his character unrelieved by any trace of compassion, and his powers swift.

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What begins with every appearance of being a fantasy — the Wonder Show features a genuine mermaid, a snake goddess, a gorgon, a minotaur, and Angel, the flying boy — becomes, eventually, science fiction. Haverstock is a gene manipulator, in addition to possessing other attributes. But how this novel should be classified is far less relevant than the fact that Reamy had a sure hand for character, time and place. The things in this story that compel attention are, first, his characterizations of the small-town people, particularly the young people. There are Tom Sawyerish boys, and a trio of girls approaching womanhood, who are made real and understandable with a few deft brushstrokes, and who then move toward fruition or toward tragedy, and both, with the believability and tension which are only possible at the hands of a writer whose compassion for people and whose vision of human nature are absolute and clear.

Then, beyond this felicity, there is Reamy's ability to portray the environs and ambiance of Hawley, Kansas as if he were walking through it now...as, in fact, I hope he is...making the reader utterly fail to realize that the writer is not actually just transcribing something that exists ready to hand.

The heroes of the catastrophic events attendant on the Wonder Show's visit are Evie Bradley, the Kansas girl who falls in love with the telekinetic albino mute; Henry-Henrietta, the half-man-half woman, and Tiny Tim. Their struggle to escape Haverstock and overcome him is as adventurous and suspensful as anything you are going to read for quite some time.

There are signs this was not the final intended draft. There are places where Reamy was probably going to write bridges between some scenes, and others where he might have cut some overgrowth. But this is a better piece of literature as it stands than that same anything you might read for quite some time.

When I think about this book, I think about the time the Providence, R.I., paper opined that beside the wraith of Poe, the shade of H.P. Lovecraft might perhaps be discerned walking the foggy midnight byways of that city. I think that if you took the road from Hawley, which is surely where Tom came from, you would not have to travel all that far before you reached Hannibal, Missouri, and Mr. Clemens.

He would have been something, Tom Reamy. He was something — he was a hell of a person — but, except for *Blind Voices*, he did not have time to fully convey that to you as he would have liked to.

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John Varley is alive, well, living in Oregon, and ornamenting the genre. *The Persistence of Vision,* his first collection, gathers up some of his outstanding short stories and novelettes. These include "The Phantom of Kansas," "Air Raid," "In the Hall of the Martian Kings," "In the Bowl," and a particular favorite of mine. "The Black Hole Passes." Some of these you will recall from their first publication here. Others may be new to you; and you may be one of the few people who have not yet been told that Herb Boehm, the byline of "Air Raid" in its magazine publication, is Varley.

The most impressive story in many ways is the title novella, "The Persistence of Vision," which has been revised from its magazine version. This is a narrative of life among the blind citizens of a commune which is retreating from the breakdown of American civilization, yet advancing toward a culmination of its own. There is no way to convey the texture and effect of that story except by sending you to read it, in the company of other major work by one of our best new people.

There is, by the way, an introduction by Algis Budrys. This has been a prejudiced review.

The Ariel Books division of Ballantine cannot possibly be making money. I have here before me two volumes, each 9" x 12", each probably 96 pages with stiff paper covers, each crammed with fantastically expensive artwork in full color and in tones, and decorative as all get out. *Ariel, The Book of Fantasy,* Volume Three, is what an SF magazine would be if it were funded by H.L. Hunt, and retails for $6.95. *Sorcerers,* a collection of fantasy art with a forward by Ken Kesey, is $7.95. The only way they can have done it at that price is by printing their own money. Judging by the quality of the engravings, they well may have.

Sorcerers displays the work of Tim Conrad, Alex Nino, Steve Hickman, Michael Hague, Kenneth Smith, Brad Johannsen, Bruce Jones, Jack Kirby, George Barr, James Steranko, and Michael Whelan. In color and line, it lays before you a species of illustration and decoration which you have probably never seen in this sort of format. An art book is by definition indescribable in prose. The best I can tell you is that there are hours and hours in it.

Ariel is designed and illustrated to the same standards. Some of the stories are reprints; some are not. They are by Michael Moorcock, Alexander Heart, David James, John James Praetorius, Bruce Jones (illustrated by Bruce Jones), Harlan Ellison, Michael Sollars and Peter

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Jackson, and Larry Niven. There are poems by Robert E. Howard and Roger Zelazny, and articles by Paul Williams and Peter Jackson, the later about an Iowa farmer who convincingly recalls being a prince of Atlantis. And there is an interview with artist Barry Windsor Smith, founder of Gorblimey Press.

As a magazine, *Ariel* is a little overdesigned. Such mundane things as page numbers are deemed only sporadically necessary, and some pages are lovely to look at as pieces of design, but difficult to read for text. Clearly, this is an art director's, not an editor's magazine. The quality of the prose, too, is subordinated to the visuals; there is not much here that is memorable writing, although all of it is good enough. Al Williamson's comic-book rendering of Ellison's "Along the Scenic Route" is an inspired notion, making more than the author did of a one-punch idea,* and this sort of enhancement — performed, to be sure, in a wide variety of styles and from a multiplicity of creative bases — is general throughout the volume.

What is being presented is a total esthetic experience, and if your mind clings unbendingly to the idea that an SF magazine has *stories*...uh, plus illustration, of course...certain of *Ariel's* features will make you uncomfortable. I confess, to some extent they make me uncomfortable. But I am willing to concede that this is probably a defect in me, and I hope a fleeting one.

(It really is incredible to me, looking at these books again as I type these words, that Ariel has any hope of commercial success. Well, at least the binding, paper and printing look reasonably durable, so that collectors' copies will show some respectable longevity after the enterprise folds and these volumes become astronomically valuable).

Berkley, at the clever hands of David Hartwell, is bringing out a Poul Anderson reprint per month. If you don't yet have *Tau Zero, Mirkheim, Satan's World, Operation Chaos,, The High Crusade, Three Hearts and Three Lions* or *The Star Fox,* now's your chance at $1.75 each. Others are to come, I'm certain, and the thing to do is buy them all, each, every one, and read them or re-read them.

The Tuck *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction and Fantasy, Volume Two,* Who's Who, M-Z, is now available from Advent: Publishers,

Ellison recently professed not to understand what I meant by calling him the quintessential SF short story writer of his time. I meant good by it, as I suspect he knows. But part of fulfilling that role is that now and then you get to write like Rod Serling, and this is one of those times.

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Inc., Post Office Box A3228, Chicago, Illinois 60690. An 8½"x11" book in sewn hard binding, it is an invaluable reference book for all that it stops with 1968. At $25.00, it is more of a library item — private libraries included, of course — than it is a casual purchase. But anyone seriously interested in the field must have it, and those familiar with the earlier compilations of the indefatigable Donald Tuck will know that, unlike those in some reference texts, the facts are reliable.

Volumes 1 and 2 are exhaustively bibliographical as well as biographical. Advent promises Volume 3 for 1979 or 1980; that one will be subtitled Paperbacks and Miscellaneous, and will include checklists, detailed discussions of magazines by title, and coverage of paperbacks. It might be well to set the money aside now.

It is a various field we live in now. Scholarly in some aspects, literate, capable of supporting publications such as the Ariel series, yet solidly entertaining when that is what is wanted.... We prosper. We grow and prosper.

Who, writing for Love Romances Corporation at a penny a word, stopping by the newsstand to pick up a 20¢ copy of *Planet* with her story in it.... Who, in her sensible shoes and her tweed suit and her hornrimmed glasses...who would have thought it?

Coming next month

Isaac Asimov's science article is titled "Fifty Million Big Ones" and is about the search for intelligent life elsewhere in the Universe. This essay is special because it marks the twentieth anniversary of Dr. Asimov's science column. In honor of the occasion we will publish an index of all of Isaac Asimov's science essays for F&SF.

Also, "Goldbrick," a fast-paced adventure thriller from **Edward Wellen,** a new story from **Jane Yolen** and lots more.

The November issue is on sale October 3.

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C. (for Carolyn) J. Cherryh is a former teacher of Latin and Ancient History who now lives in Oklahoma City. She writes: "I began writing when I was ten, doing a novel a year and tucking each into the closet. After teaching for a year, I started sending my work in, gathered the usual rejection slips, improved my art (ah, what a tribulation is bridged in that brief statement!) and sold my first novel in 1975." This is only her second short story, but she has won a large following for her novels, which include Gate of Ivrel, Brothers of Earth *and* Hunter of Worlds.

Cassandra

by C. J. CHERRYH

Fires.

They grew unbearable here.

Alis felt for the door of the flat and knew that it would be solid. She could feel the cool metal of the knob amid the flames ... saw the shadow-stairs through the roiling smoke outside, clearly enough to feel her way down them, convincing her senses that they would bear her weight.

Crazy Alis. She made no haste. The fires burned steadily. She passed through them, descended the insubstantial steps to the solid ground — she could not abide the elevator, that closed space with the shadow-floor, that plummeted down and down; she made the ground floor, averted her eyes from the red, heatless flames.

A ghost said good morning to her ... old man Willis, thin and transparent against the leaping flames. She blinked, bade it good morning in return — did not miss old Willis' shake of the head as she opened the door and left. Noon traffic passed, heedless of the flames, the hulks that blazed in the street, the tumbling brick.

The apartment caved in — black bricks falling into the inferno, Hell amid the green, ghostly trees. Old Willis fled, burning, fell — turned to jerking, blackened flesh — died, daily. Alis no longer cried, hardly flinched. She ignored the horror spilling about her, forced her way through crumbling brick that held no substance, past busy ghosts that could not be troubled in their haste.

Kingsley's Cafe stood, whole, more so than the rest. It was refuge for the afternoon, a feeling of safety. She pushed open the door, heard the tinkle of a lost bell.

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Shadowy patrons looked, whispered.

Crazy Alis.

The whispers troubled her. She avoided their eyes and their presence, settled in a booth in the corner that bore only traces of the fire.

WAR, the headline in the vender said in heavy type. She shivered, looked up into Sam Kingsley's wraithlike face.

"Coffee," she said. "Ham sandwich." It was constantly the same. She varied not even the order. Mad Alis. Her affliction supported her. A check came each month, since the hospital had turned her out. Weekly she returned to the clinic, to doctors who now faded like the others. The building burned about them. Smoke rolled down the blue, antiseptic halls. Last week a patient ran — burning —

A rattle of china. Sam set the coffee on the table, came back shortly and brought the sandwich. She bent her head and ate, transparent food on half-broken china, a cracked, fire-smudged cup with a transparent handle. She ate, hungry enough to overcome the horror that had become ordinary. A hundred times seen, the most terrible sights lost their power over her: she no longer cried at shadows. She talked to ghosts and touched them, ate the food that somehow stilled the ache in her belly, wore the same too-large black sweater and worn blue shirt and grey slacks because they were all she had that seemed solid. Nightly she washed them and dried them and put them on the next day, letting others hang in the closet. They were the only solid ones.

She did not tell the doctors these things. A lifetime in and out of hospitals had made her wary of confidences. She knew what to say. Her half-vision let her smile at ghost-faces, cannily manipulate their charts and cards, sitting in the ruins that had begun to smolder by late afternoon. A blackened corpse lay in the hall. She did not flinch when she smiled good-naturedly at the doctor.

They gave her medicines. The medicines stopped the dreams, the siren screams, the running steps in the night past her apartment. They let her sleep in the ghostly bed, high above ruin, with the flames crackling and the voices screaming. She did not speak of these things. Years in hospitals had taught her. She complained only of nightmares, and restlessness, and they let her have more of the red pills.

WAR, the headline blazoned.

The cup rattled and trembled against the saucer as she picked it up. She swallowed the last bit of bread and washed it down with coffee, tried not to look beyond the broken front window, where twisted metal hulks smoked on the street.

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She stayed, as she did each day, and Sam grudgingly refilled her cup, that she would nurse as far as she could and then order another one. She lifted it, savoring the feel of it, stopping the trembling of her hands.

The bell jingled faintly. A man closed the door, settled at the counter.

Whole, clear in her eyes. She stared at him, startled, heart pounding. He ordered coffee, moved to buy a paper from the vender, settled again and let the coffee grow cold while he read the news. She had view only of his back while he read, scuffed brown leather coat, brown hair a little over his collar. At last he drank the cooled coffee all at one draught, shoved money onto the counter and left the paper lying, headlines turned face down.

A young face, flesh and bone among the ghosts. He ignored them all and went for the door.

Alis thrust herself from her booth.

"Hey!" Sam called at her.

She rummaged in her purse as the bell jingled, flung a bill onto the counter, heedless that it was a five. Fear was coppery in her mouth; he was gone. She fled the cafe, edged round debris without thinking of it, saw his back disappearing among the ghosts.

She ran, shouldering them, braving the flames — cried out as debris showered painlessly on her, and kept running.

Ghosts turned and stared, shocked — *he* did likewise, and she ran to him, stunned to see the same shock on his face, regarding her.

"What is it?" he asked.

She blinked, dazed to realize he saw her no differently than the others. She could not answer. In irritation he started walking again, and she followed. Tears slid down her face, her breath hard in her throat. People stared. He noticed her presence and walked the faster, through debris, through fires. A wall began to fall and she cried out despite herself.

He jerked about. The dust and the soot rose up as a cloud behind him. His face was distraught and angry. He stared at her as the others did. Mothers drew children away from the scene. A band of youths stared, cold-eyed and laughing.

"Wait," she said. He opened his mouth as if he would curse her; she flinched, and the tears were cold in the heatless wind of the fires. His face twisted in an embarrassed pity. He thrust a hand into his pocket and began to pull out money, hastily, tried to give it to her. She shook her head furiously, trying to stop the tears — stared upward, flinching, as another building fell into flames.

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"What's wrong?" he asked her. "What's wrong with you?"

"Please," she said. He looked about at the staring ghosts, then began to walk slowly. She walked with him, nerving herself not to cry out at the ruin, the pale moving figures that wandered through burned shells of buildings, the twisted corpses in the street, where traffic moved.

"What's your name?" he asked. She told him. He gazed at her from time to time as they walked, a frown creasing his brow. He had a face well-worn for youth, a tiny scar beside the mouth. He looked older than she. She felt uncomfortable in the way his eyes traveled over her: she decided to accept it — to bear with anything that gave her this one solid presence. Against every inclination she reached her hand into the bend of his arm, tightened her fingers on the worn leather. He accepted it.

And after a time he slid his arm behind her and about her waist, and they walked like lovers.

WAR, the headline at the newsstand cried.

He started to turn into a street by Tenn's Hardware. She balked at what she saw there. He paused when he felt it, faced her with his back to the fires of that burning.

"Don't go," she said.

"Where do you want to go?"

She shrugged helplessly, indicated the main street, the other direction.

He talked to her then, as he might talk to a child, humoring her fear. It was pity. Some treated her that way. She recognized it, and took even that.

His name was Jim. He had come into the city yesterday, hitched rides. He was looking for work. He knew no one in the city. She listened to his rambling awkwardness, reading through it. When he was done, she stared at him still, and saw his face contract in dismay at her.

"I'm not crazy," she told him, which was a lie, that everyone in Sudbury would have known, only *he* would not, knowing no one. His face was true and solid, and the tiny scar by the mouth made it hard when he was thinking; at another time she would have been terrified of him. Now she was terrified of losing him amid the ghosts.

"It's the war," he said.

She nodded, trying to look at him and not at the fires. His fingers touched her arm, gently. "It's the war," he said again. "It's all crazy. Everyone's crazy."

And then he put his hand on her shoulder and turned her back the other way, toward the park, where green leaves waved over black, skeletal limbs. They walked along the lake, and for the first time in a long time she drew breath

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and felt a whole, sane presence beside her.

They bought corn, and sat on the grass by the lake, and flung it to the spectral swans. Wraiths of passersby were few, only enough to keep a feeling of occupancy about the place — old people, mostly, tottering about the deliberate tranquillity of their routine despite the headlines.

"Do you see them," she ventured to ask him finally, "all thin and grey?"

He did not understand, did not take her literally, only shrugged. Warily, she abandoned that questioning at once. She rose to her feet and stared at the horizon, where the smoke bannered on the wind.

"Buy you supper?" he asked.

She turned, prepared for this, and managed a shy, desperate smile. "Yes," she said, knowing what else he reckoned to buy with that — willing, and hating herself, and desperately afraid that he would walk away, tonight, tomorrow. She did not know men. She had no idea what she could say or do to prevent his leaving, only that he would when someday he realized her madness.

Even her parents had not been able to bear with that — visited her only at first in the hospitals, and then only on holidays, and then not at all. She did not know where they were.

There was a neighbor boy who drowned. She had said he would. She had cried for it. All the town said it was she who pushed him.

Crazy Alis.

Fantasizes, the doctors said. Not dangerous.

They let her out. There were special schools, state schools.

And from time to time — hospitals.

Tranquilizers.

She had left the red pills at home. The realization brought sweat to her palms. They gave sleep. They stopped the dreams. She clamped her lips against the panic and made up her mind that she would not need them — not while she was not alone. She slipped her hand into his arm and walked with him, secure and strange, up the steps from the park to the streets.

And stopped.

The fires were out.

Ghost-buildings rose above their jagged and windowless shells. Wraiths moved through masses of debris, almost obscured at times. He tugged her on, but her step faltered, made him look at her strangely and put his arm about her.

"You're shivering," he said. "Cold?"

She shook her head, tried to smile. The fires were out. She tried to take it for a good omen. The

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nightmare was over. She looked up into his solid, concerned face, and her smile almost became a wild laugh.

"I'm hungry," she said.

They lingered long over a dinner in Graben's — he in his battered jacket, she in her sweater that hung at the tails and elbows: the spectral patrons were in far better clothes, and stared at them, and they were set in a corner nearest the door, where they would be less visible. There was cracked crystal and broken china on insubstantial tables, and the stars winked coldly in gaping ruin above the wan glittering of the broken chandeliers.

Ruins, cold, peaceful ruin.

Alis looked about her calmly. One could live in ruins, only so the fires were gone.

And there was Jim, who smiled at her without any touch of pity, only a wild, fey desperation that she understood — who spent more than he could afford in Graben's, the inside of which she had never hoped to see — and told her — predictably — that she was beautiful. Others had said it. Vaguely she resented such triteness from him, from him whom she had decided to trust. She smiled sadly, when he said it, and gave it up for a frown and, fearful of offending him with her melancholies, made it a smile again.

Crazy Alis. He would learn and leave tonight if she were not careful. She tried to put on gaiety, tried to laugh.

And then the music stopped in the restaurant, and the noise of the other diners went dead, and the speaker was giving an inane announcement.

Shelters ... shelters ... shelters.

Screams broke out. Chairs overturned.

Alis went limp in her chair, felt Jim's cold, solid hand tugging at hers, saw his frightened face mouthing her name as he took her up into his arms, pulled her with him, started running.

The cold air outside hit her, shocked her into sight of the ruins again, wraith figures pelting toward that chaos where the fires had been worst.

And she knew.

"No!" she cried, pulling at his arm. "No!" she insisted, and bodies half-seen buffeted them in a rush to destruction. He yielded to her sudden certainty, gripped her hand and fled with her against the crowds as the sirens wailed madness through the night — fled with her as she ran her sighted way through the ruin.

And into Kingsley's, where cafe tables stood abandoned with food still on them, doors ajar, chairs overturned. Back they went into the kitchens and down and down into

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the cellar, the dark, the cold safety from the flames.

No others found them there. At last the earth shook, too deep for sound. The sirens ceased and did not come on again.

They lay in the dark and clutched each other and shivered, and above them for hours raged the sound of fire, smoke sometimes drifting in to sting their eyes and noses. There was the distant crash of brick, rumblings that shook the ground, that came near, but never touched their refuge.

And in the morning, with the scent of fire still in the air, they crept up into the murky daylight.

The ruins were still and hushed. The ghost-buildings were solid now, mere shells. The wraiths were gone. It was the fires themselves that were strange, some true, some not, playing above dark, cold brick, and most were fading.

Jim swore softly, over and over again, and wept.

When she looked at him she was dry-eyed, for she had done her crying already.

And she listened as he began to talk about food, about leaving the city, the two of them. "All right," she said.

Then clamped her lips, shut her eyes against what she saw in his face. When she opened them it was still true, the sudden transparency, the wash of blood. She trembled, and he shook at her, his ghost-face distraught.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "What's wrong?"

She could not tell him, would not. She remembered the boy who had drowned, remembered the other ghosts. Of a sudden she tore from his hands and ran, dodging the maze of debris that, this morning, was solid.

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"Alis!" he cried and came after her.

"No!" she cried suddenly, turning, seeing the unstable wall, the cascading brick. She started back and stopped, unable to force herself. She held out her hands to warn him back, saw them solid.

The brick rumbled, fell. Dust came up, thick for a moment, obscuring everything.

She stood still, hands at her sides, then wiped her sooty face and turned and started walking, keeping to the center of the dead streets.

Overhead, clouds gathered, heavy with rain.

She wandered at peace now, seeing the rain spot the pavement, not yet feeling it.

In time the rain did fall, and the ruins became chill and cold. She visited the dead lake and the burned trees, the ruin of Graben's, out of which she gathered a string of crystal to wear.

She smiled when, a day later, a looter drove her from her food supply. He had a wraith's look, and she laughed from a place he did not dare to climb and told him so.

And recovered her cache later when it came true, and settled among the ruined shells that held no further threat, no other nightmares, with her crystal necklace and tomorrows that were the same as today.

One could live in ruins, only so the fires were gone.

And the ghosts were all in the past, invisible.

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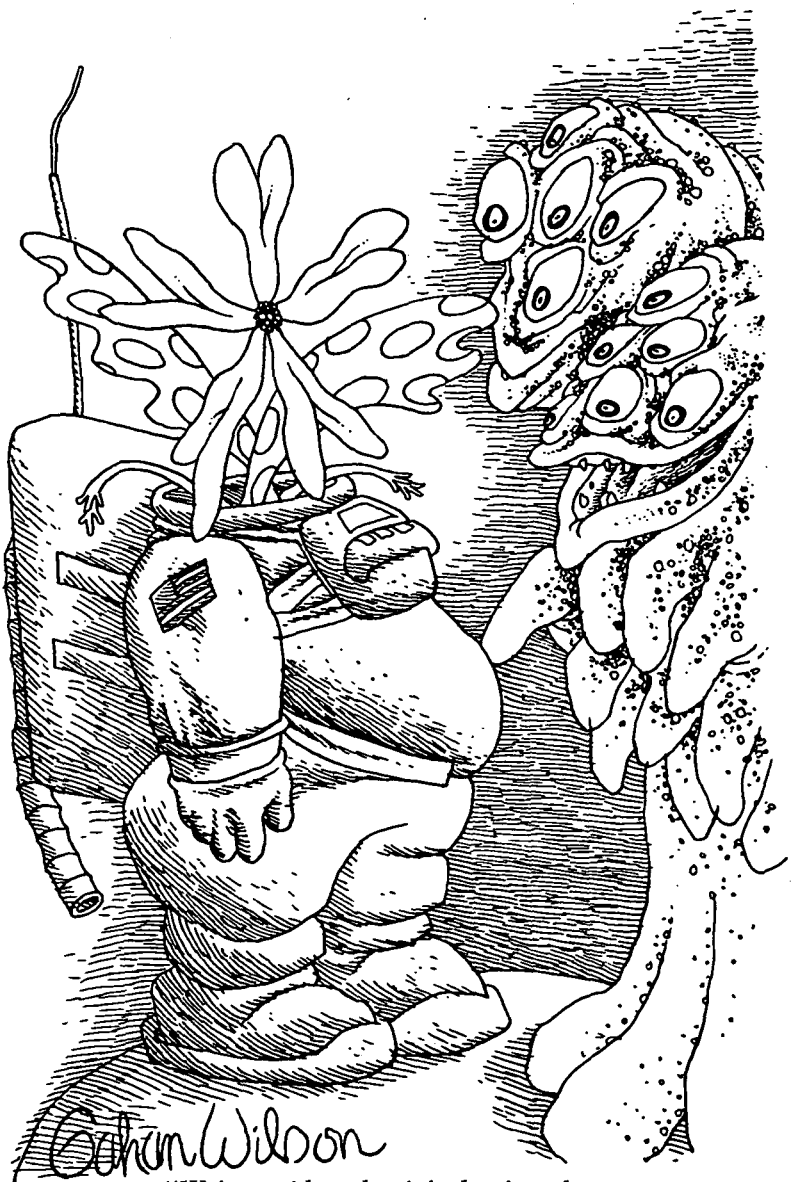

"We've no idea what it is, but it makes a darling planter!"

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Pill Pronzini and Barry Malzberg, who have collaborated on a couple of novels (suspense thrillers) here come up with that rarest of birds, a short-short that truly flies.

A Clone At Last

by BILL PRONZINI and BARRY N. MALZBERG

"I'm sorry," the lovely blonde said to Lapham, "but I could never invite a man into my Home Complex that I don't really know. But thanks anyway for an interesting evening."

And she shut the door firmly in his face.

Lapham was very tired of women telling him they didn't invite a man into their Home Complex that they didn't really know. He was very tired of having doors shut in his face. It was 2172, a new era in interpersonal communication, wasn't it? And he was actually a fairly decent-looking man, wasn't he? Not to mention being a fairly successful pocket deity to many of the *Aphid Chorae* of Ceres, and having a number of good qualities which included but were not limited to earnestness, honesty, punctuality and never squeezing his pimples in public. Or taking the bandages off his radiation scars.

For some reason, however, women did not seem to like him.

So Lapham, in desperation, finally went to the Cloning Foundation and applied for Opposite Gender Replication. He would *create* the woman who would understand him, so there. Opposite Gender Replication was a recent innovation of the Foundation, and having been established only within the most recent decade and having been made available at terrific expense to people such as Lapham who had reasons to need an understanding ear from those of a different genital persuasion.

Lapham permitted his blood to be typed, his cells to be analyzed, his brain waves to be charted, his persona to be electromagnetically shocked and his private parts to be fondled in an unseemly fashion. His facial bandages, however, were left respectfully in place by the person-

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nel of the enormously expensive Cloning Foundation. (He had inherited three-quarters of the asteroid Ceres, which made his lot somewhat easier.) At the end of this painful and somewhat unprintable process, a pure cell of his was extracted and left to lie in the darkest and most cherished spaces of the Foundation's nethermost level.

Lapham waited for eighteen years. Eighteen years was then as now the age of legal majority and he did not wish to be indicted for statutory rape, even of himself. The years sped by. Lapham invented a cheap substitute for the wheel, and after patenting it rode it all the way to Proxima Centauri and back. Bored, he created sub-life in one of the testing arenas and fed it to the grateful *Aphid Chorae*. He waited patiently, amusing himself through all the empty little hours as he aged from twenty-nine to forty-seven.

He did not, through all of this, deal with women at all. He was saving himself for herself.

At precisely oh eight hundred hours on her eighteenth birthday, the pimply blonde clone said, "I'm sorry but I never invite a man into my Home Complex that I don't really know. But thanks anyway for an interesting evening."

And Lapham shut the door firmly in Lapham's face.

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Stephen King, author of Carrie, Salem's Lot, The Shining *and "The Night of the Tiger" (F&SF, Feb. 1978), returns with a grim and gripping fantasy about the last gunslinger and his search for The Man in Black.*

The Gunslinger

by STEPHEN KING

I

The man in black fled across the desert, and the gunslinger followed.

The desert was the apotheosis of all deserts, huge, standing to the sky for what might have been parsecs in all directions. White; blinding; waterless; without feature save for the faint, cloudy haze of the mountains which sketched themselves on the horizon and the devil-grass which brought sweet dreams, nightmares, death. An occasional tombstone sign pointed the way, for once the drifted track that cut its way through the thick crust of alkali had been a highway and coaches had followed it. The world had moved on since then. The world had emptied.

The gunslinger walked stolidly, not hurrying, not loafing. A hide waterbag was slung around his middle like a bloated sausage. It was almost full. He had progressed through the *khef* over many years, and had reached the fifth level. At the seventh or eighth, he would not have been thirsty; he could have watched his own body dehydrate with clinical, detached attention, watering its crevices and dark inner hollows only when his logic told him it must be done. He was not seventh or eighth. He was fifth. So he was thirsty, although he had no particular urge to drink. In a vague way, all this pleased him. It was romantic.

Below the waterbag were his guns, finely weighted to his hand. The two belts crisscrossed above his crotch. The holsters were oiled too deeply for even this Philistine sun to crack. The stocks of the guns

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were sandalwood, yellow and finely grained. The holsters were tied down with rawhide cord, and they swung heavily against his hips. The brass casings of the cartridges looped into the gunbelts twinkled and flashed and heliographed in the sun. The leather made subtle creaking noises. The guns themselves made no noise. They had spilled blood. There was no need to make noise in the sterility of the desert.

His clothes were the no-color of rain or dust. His shirt was open at the throat, with a rawhide thong dangling loosely in hand-punched eyelets. The pants were seam-stretched dungarees of no particular make.

He breasted a gently rising dune (although there was no sand here; the desert was hardpan, and even the harsh winds that blew when dark came raised only an aggravating harsh dust like scouring powder) and saw the kicked remains of a tiny campfire on the lee side, the side which the sun would quit earliest. Small signs like this, once more affirming the man in black's essential humanity, never failed to please him. His lips stretched in the pitted, flaked remains of his face. He squatted.

He had burned the devil-grass, of course. It was the only thing out here that *would* burn. It burned with a greasy, flat light, and it burned slow. Border dwellers had told him that devils lived even in the flames. They burned it but would not look into the light. They said the devils hypnotized, beckoned, would eventually draw the one who looked into the fires. And the next man foolish enough to look into the fire might see you.

The burned grass was crisscrossed in the now-familiar ideographic pattern, and crumbled to gray senselessness before the gunslinger's prodding hand. There was nothing in the remains but a charred scrap of bacon, which he ate thoughtfully. It had always been this way. The gunslinger had followed the man in black across the desert for two months now, across the endless, screamingly monotonous purgatorial wastes, and had yet to find spoor other than the hygienic sterile ideographs of the man in black's campfires. He had not found a can, a bottle, a waterskin (the gunslinger had left four of those behind, like dead snakeskins).

— Perhaps the campfires are a message, spelled out letter by letter. *Take a powder.* Or, *The end draweth nigh.* Or maybe even, *Eat at Joe's.* It didn't matter. He had no understanding of the ideograms, if they were ideograms. And the remains were as cold as all the others. He knew he was closer, but did not know how he knew. That didn't

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matter either. He stood up, brushing his hands.

No other trace; the wind, razor-sharp, had of course filed away even what scant tracks the hardpan held. He had never even been able to find his quarry's droppings. Nothing. Only these cold campfires along the ancient highway and the relentless range-finder in his own head.

He sat down and allowed himself a short pull from the waterbag. He scanned the desert, looked up at the sun, which was now sliding down the far quadrant of the sky. He got up, removed his gloves from his belt, and began to pull devil-grass for his own fire, which he laid over the ashes the man in black had left. He found the irony, like the romance of his thirst, bitterly appealing.

He did not use the flint and steel until the remains of the day were only the fugitive heat in the ground beneath him and a sardonic orange line on the monochrome western horizon. He watched the south patiently, toward the mountains, not hoping or expecting to see the thin straight line of smoke from a new campfire, but merely watching because that was a part of it. There was nothing. He was close, but only relatively so. Not close enough to see smoke at dusk.

He struck his spark to the dry, shredded grass and lay down upwind, letting the dreamsmoke blow out toward the waste. The wind, except for occasional gyrating dust-devils, was constant.

Above, the stars were unwinking, also constant. Suns and worlds by the million. Dizzying constellations, cold fire in every primary hue. As he watched, the sky washed from violet to ebony. A meteor etched a brief, spectacular arc and winked out. The fire threw strange shadows as the devil-grass burned its slow way down into new patterns — not ideograms but a straightforward crisscross vaguely frightening in its own no-nonsense surety. He had laid his fuel in a pattern that was not artful but only workable. It spoke of blacks and whites. It spoke of a man who might straighten bad pictures in strange hotel rooms. The fire burned its steady, slow flame, and phantoms danced in its incandescent core. The gunslinger did not see. He slept. The two patterns, art and craft, were welded together. The wind moaned. Every now and then a perverse downdraft would make the smoke whirl and eddy toward him, and sporadic whiffs of the smoke touched him. They built dreams in the same way that a small irritant may build a pearl in an oyster. Occasionally the gunslinger moaned with the wind. The stars were as indifferent to this as they were to wars, crucifixions, resurrections.

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This also would have pleased him.

II

He had come down off the last of the foothills leading the donkey, whose eyes were already dead and bulging with the heat. He had passed the last town three weeks before, and since then there had only been the deserted coach track and an occasional huddle of border dwellers' sod dwellings. The huddles had degenerated into single dwellings, most inhabited by lepers or madmen. He found the madmen better company. One had given him a stainless steel Silva compass and bade him give it to Jesus. The gunslinger took it gravely. If he saw Him, he would turn over the compass. He did not expect to.

Five days had passed since the last hut, and he had begun to suspect there would be no more when he topped the last eroded hill and saw the familiar low-backed sod roof.

The dweller, a surprisingly young man with a wild shock of strawberry hair that reached almost to his waist, was weeding a scrawny stand of corn with zealous abandon. The mule let out a wheezing grunt and the dweller looked up, glaring blue eyes coming target-center on the gunslinger in a moment. He raised both hands in curt salute and then bent to the corn again, humping up the row next to his hut with back bent, tossing devil-grass and an occasional stunted corn plant over his shoulder. His hair flopped and flew in the wind that now came directly from the desert, with nothing to break it.

The gunslinger came down the hill slowly, leading the donkey on which his waterskins sloshed. He paused by the edge of the lifeless-looking cornpatch, drew a drink from one of his skins to start the saliva, and spat into the arid soil.

"Life for your crop."

"Life for your own," the dweller answered and stood up. His back popped audibly. He surveyed the gunslinger without fear. What little of his face that was visible between beard and hair seemed unmarked by the rot, and his eyes, while a bit wild, seemed sane.

"I don't have anything but corn and beans," he said. "Corn's free, but you'll have to kick something in for the beans. A man brings them out once in a while. He don't stay long." The dweller laughed shortly. "Afraid of spirits."

"I expect he thinks you're one."

"I expect he does."

They looked at each other in silence for a moment.

The dweller put out his hand. "Brown is my name."

The gunslinger shook his hand. As he did so, a scrawny raven croaked from the low peak of the

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sod roof. The dweller gestured at it briefly:

"That's Zoltan."

At the sound of its name the raven croaked again and flew across to Brown. It landed on the dweller's head and roosted, talons firmly twined in the wild thatch of hair.

"Screw you," Zoltan croaked brightly. "Screw you and the horse you rode in on."

The gunslinger nodded amiably.

"Beans, beans, the musical fruit," the raven recited, inspired. "The more you eat, the more you toot."

"You teach him that?"

"That's all he wants to learn, I guess," Brown said. "Tried to teach him The Lord's Prayer once." His eyes traveled out beyond the hut for a moment, toward the gritty, featureless hardpan. "Guess this ain't Lord's Prayer country. You're a gunslinger. That right?"

"Yes." He hunkered down and brought out his makings. Zoltan launched himself from Brown's head and landed, flittering, on the gunslinger's shoulder.

"After the other one, I guess."

"Yes." The inevitable question formed in his mouth: "How long since he passed by?"

Brown shrugged. "I don't know. Time's funny out here. More than two weeks. Less than two months. The bean man's been twice since he passed. I'd guess six weeks. That's probably wrong."

"The more you eat, the more you toot," Zoltan said.

"Did he stop off?" the gunslinger asked.

Brown nodded. "He stayed supper, same as you will, I guess. We passed the time."

The gunslinger stood up and the bird flew back to the roof, squawking. He felt an odd, trembling eagerness. "What did he talk about?"

Brown cocked an eyebrow at him. "Not much. Did it ever rain and when did I come here and had I buried my wife. I did most of the talking, which ain't usual." He paused, and the only sound was the stark wind. "He's a sorcerer, ain't he?"

"Yes."

Brown nodded slowly. "I knew. Are you?"

"I'm just a man."

"You'll never catch him."

"I'll catch him."

They looked at each other, a sudden depth of feeling between them, the dweller upon his dust-puff-dry ground, the gunslinger on the hardpan that shelved down to the desert. He reached for his flint.

"Here." Brown produced a sulfur-headed match and struck it with a grimed nail. The gunslinger pushed the tip of his smoke into the flame and drew.

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"Thanks."

"You'll want to fill your skins," the dweller said, turning away. "Spring's under the eaves in back. I'll start dinner."

The gunslinger stepped gingerly over the rows of corn and went around back. The spring was at the bottom of a hand-dug well, lined with stones to keep the powdery earth from caving. As he descended the rickety ladder, the gunslinger reflected that the stones must represent two years' work easily — hauling, dragging, laying. The water was clear but slow-moving, and filling the skins was a long chore. While he was topping the second, Zoltan perched on the lip of the well.

"Screw you and the horse you rode in on," he advised.

He looked up, startled. The shaft was about fifteen feet deep: easy enough for Brown to drop a rock on him, break his head, and steal everything on him. A crazy or a rotter wouldn't do it; Brown was neither. Yet he liked Brown, and so he pushed the thought out of his mind and got the rest of his water. What came, came.

When he came through the hut's door and walked down the steps (the hovel proper was set below ground level, designed to catch and hold the coolness of the nights), Brown was poking ears of corn into the embers of a tiny fire with a hardwood spatula. Two ragged plates had been set at opposite ends of a dun blanket. Water for the beans was just beginning to bubble in a pot hung over the fire.

"I'll pay for the water, too."

Brown did not look up. "The water's a gift from God. Pappa Doc brings the beans."

The gunslinger grunted a laugh and sat down with his back against one rude wall, folded his arms and closed his eyes. After a little, the smell of roasting corn came to his nose. There was a pebbly rattle as Brown dumped a paper of dry beans into the pot. An occasional *tak-tak-tak* as Zoltan walked restlessly on the roof. He was tired; he had been going sixteen and sometimes eighteen hours a day between here and the horror that had occurred in Tull, the last village. He had been afoot for the last twelve days; the mule was at the end of its endurance.

Tak-tak-tak.

Two weeks, Brown had said, or as much as six. Didn't matter. There had been calendars in Tull, and they had remembered the man in black because of the old man he had healed on his way through. Just an old man dying with the weed. An old man of thirty-five. And if Brown was right, the man in black had lost ground since then. But the desert was next. And the desert would be hell.

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Tak-tak-tak.

— Lend me your wings, bird. I'll spread them and fly on the thermals.

He slept.

III

Brown woke him up five hours later. It was dark. The only light was the dull cherry glare of the banked embers.

"Your mule has passed on," Brown said. "Dinner's ready."

"How?"

Brown shrugged. "Roasted and boiled, how else? You picky?"

"No, the mule."

"It just laid over, that's all. It looked like an old mule." And with a touch of apology: "Zoltan et the eyes."

"Oh." He might have expected it. "All right."

Brown surprised him again when they sat down to the blanket that served as a table by asking a brief blessing: Rain, health, expansion to the spirit.

"Do you believe in an afterlife?" The gunslinger asked him as Brown dropped three ears of hot corn onto his plate.

Brown nodded. "I think this is it."

IV

The beans were like bullets, the corn tough. Outside, the prevailing wind snuffled and whined around the ground-level eaves. He ate quickly, ravenously, drinking four cups of water with the meal. Halfway through, there was a machine-gun rapping at the door. Brown got up and let Zoltan in. The bird flew across the room and hunched moodily in the corner.

"Musical fruit," he muttered.

Afterward, the gunslinger offered his tobacco.

— Now. Now the questions will come.

But Brown asked no questions. He smoked and looked at the dying embers of the fire. It was already noticeably cooler in the hovel.

"Lead us not into temptation," Zoltan said suddenly, apocalyptically.

The gunslinger started as if he had been shot at. He was suddenly sure that it was an illusion, all of it (not a dream, no; an enchantment), that the man in black had spun a spell and was trying to tell him something in a maddeningly obtuse, symbolic way.

"Have you been through Tull?" he asked suddenly.

Brown nodded. "Coming here, and once to sell corn. It rained that year. Lasted maybe fifteen minutes. The ground just seemed to open and suck it up. An hour later it was just as white and dry as ever. But the corn — God, the corn. You could see it grow. That wasn't so bad. But you could *hear* it, as if the

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rain had given it a mouth. It wasn't a happy sound. It seemed to be sighing and groaning its way out of the earth." He paused. "I had extra, so I took it and sold it. Pappa Doc said he would, but he would have cheated me. So I went."

"You don't like town?"

"No."

"I almost got killed there," the gunslinger said abruptly.

"That so?"

"I killed a man that was touched by God," the gunslinger said. "Only it wasn't God. It was the man in black."

"He laid you a trap."

"Yes."

They looked at each other across the shadows, the moment taking on overtones of finality.

— *Now* the questions will come.

But Brown had nothing to say. His smoke was a smoldering roach, but when the gunslinger tapped his poke, Brown shook his head.

Zoltan shifted restlessly, seemed about to speak, subsided.

"May I tell you about it?" the gunslinger asked.

"Sure."

The gunslinger searched for words to begin and found none. "I have to flow," he said.

Brown nodded. "The water does that. The corn, please?"

"Sure."

He went up the stairs and out into the dark. The stars glittered overhead in a mad splash. The wind pulsed steadily. His urine arched out over the powdery cornfield in a wavering stream. The man in black had sent him here. Brown might even be the man in black himself. It might be —

He shut the thoughts away. The only contingency he had not learned how to bear was the possibility of his own madness. He went back inside.

"Have you decided if I'm an enchantment yet?" Brown asked, amused.

The gunslinger paused on the tiny landing, startled. Then he came down slowly and sat.

"I started to tell you about Tull."

"Is it growing?"

"It's dead," the gunslinger said, and the words hung in the air.

Brown nodded. "The desert. I think it may strangle everything eventually. Did you know that there was once a coach road across it?"

The gunslinger closed his eyes. His mind whirled crazily.

"You doped me," he said thickly.

"No. I've done nothing."

The gunslinger opened his eyes warily.

"You won't feel right about it unless I invite you," Brown said. "And so I do. Will you tell me about Tull?"

The gunslinger opened his

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mouth hesitantly and was surprised to find that this time the words were there. He began to speak in flat bursts that slowly spread into an even, slightly toneless narrative. The doped feeling left him, and he found himself oddly excited. He talked deep into the night. Brown did not interrupt at all. Neither did the bird.

V

He had bought the mule in Pricetown a week earlier, and when he reached Tull, it was still fresh. The sun had set an hour earlier, but the gunslinger had continued traveling, guided by the town glow in the sky, then by the uncannily clear notes of a honky-tonk piano playing *Hey Jude*. The road widened as it took on tributaries.

The forests had been gone long now, replaced by the monotonous flat country: endless, desolate fields gone to timothy and low shrubs, shacks, eerie, deserted estates guarded by brooding, shadowed mansions where demons undeniably walked; leering, empty shanties where the people had either moved on or had been moved along, an occasional dweller's hovel, given away by a single flickering point of light in the dark, or by sullen, inbred clans toiling silently in the fields by day. Corn was the main crop, but there were beans and also some peas. An occasional scrawny cow stared at him lumpishly from between peeled alder poles. Coaches had passed him four times, twice coming and twice going, nearly empty as they came up on him from behind and bypassed him and his mule, fuller as they headed back toward the forests of the north.

It was ugly country. It had showered twice since he had left Pricetown, grudgingly both times. Even the timothy looked yellow and dispirited. Ugly country. He had seen no sign of the man in black. Perhaps he had taken a coach.

The road made a bend, and beyond it the gunslinger clucked the mule to a stop and looked down at Tull. It was at the floor of a circular, bowl-shaped hollow, a shoddy jewel in a cheap setting. There were a number of lights, most of them clustered around the area of the music. There looked to be four streets, three running at right angles to the coach road, which was the main avenue of the town. Perhaps there would be a restaurant. He doubted it, but perhaps. He clucked at the mule.

More houses sporadically lined the road now, most of them still deserted. He passed a tiny graveyard with moldy, leaning wooden slabs overgrown and choked by the rank devil-grass. Perhaps five hundred feet further on he passed a chewed sign which said: TULL

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The paint was flaked almost to the point of illegibility. There was another further on, but the gunslinger was not able to read that one at all.

A fool's chorus of half-stoned voices was rising in the final protracted lyric of *Hey Jude* — "Naa naa-naa naa-na-na-na ... hey, Jude ..." — as he entered the town proper. It was a dead sound, like the wind in the hollow of a rotted tree. Only the prosaic thump and pound of the honky-tonk piano saved him from seriously wondering if the man in black might not have raised ghosts to inhabit a deserted town. He smiled a little at the thought.

There were a few people on the streets, not many, but a few. Three ladies wearing black slacks and identical middy blouses passed by on the opposite boardwalk, not looking at him with pointed curiosity. Their faces seemed to swim above their all-but-invisible bodies like huge, pallid baseballs with eyes. A solemn old man with a straw hat perched firmly on top of his head watched him from the steps of a boarded-up grocery store. A scrawny tailor with a late customer paused to watch him by; he held up the lamp in his window for a better look. The gunslinger nodded. Neither the tailor nor his customer nodded back. He could feel their eyes resting heavily against the low-slung holsters that lay against his hips. A young boy, perhaps thirteen, and his girl crossed the street a block up, pausing imperceptibly. Their footfalls raised little hanging clouds of dust. A few of the streetside lamps worked, but their glass sides were cloudy with congealed oil. Most had been crashed out. There was a livery, probably depending on the coach line for its survival. Three boys were crouched silently around a marble ring drawn in the dust to one side of the barn's gaping maw, smoking cornshuck cigarettes. They made long shadows in the yard.

The gunslinger led his mule past them and looked into the dim depths of the barn. One lamp glowed sunkenly, and a shadow jumped and flickered as a gangling old man in bib overalls forked loose timothy hay into the hay loft with huge, grunting swipes of his fork.

"Hey!" the gunslinger called.

The fork faltered and the hostler looked around waspishly. "Hey yourself!"

"I got a mule here."

"Good for you."

The gunslinger flicked a heavy, unevenly milled gold piece into the semidark. It rang on the old, chaff-drifted boards and glittered.

The hostler came forward, bent, picked it up, squinted at the gunslinger. His eyes dropped to the gunbelts and he nodded sourly.

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"How long you want him put up?"

"A night. Maybe two. Maybe longer."

"I ain't got no change for gold."

"I'm not asking for any."

"Blood money," the hostler muttered.

"What?"

"Nothing." The hostler caught the mule's bridle and led him inside.

"Rub him down!" The gunslinger called. The old man did not turn.

The gunslinger walked out to the boys crouched around the marble ring. They had watched the entire exchange with contemptuous interest.

"How is it hanging?" the gunslinger asked conversationally.

No answer.

"You dudes live in town?"

No answer.

One of the boys removed a crazily tilted twist of cornshuck from his mouth, grasped a green cat's-eye marble, and squirted it into the dirt circle. It struck a croaker and knocked it outside. He picked up the cat's-eye and prepared to shoot again.

"There a restaurant in this town?" the gunslinger asked.

One of them looked up, the youngest. There was a huge cold-sore at the corner of his mouth, but his eyes were still ingenuous. He looked at the gunslinger with hooded brimming wonder that was touching and frightening.

"Might get a burger at Sheb's."

"That the honky-tonk?"

The boy nodded but didn't speak. The eyes of his playmates had turned ugly and hostile.

The gunslinger touched the brim of his hat. "I'm grateful. It's good to know someone in this town is bright enough to talk."

He walked past, mounted the boardwalk and started down toward Sheb's, hearing the clear, contemptuous voice of one of the others, hardly more than a childish treble: "Weed-eater! How long you been screwin' your sister, Charlie? Weed-eater!"

There were three flaring kerosene lamps in front of Sheb's, one to each side and one nailed above the drunk-hung batwing doors. The chorus of *Hey Jude* had petered out, and the piano was plinking some other old ballad. Voices murmured like broken threads. The gunslinger paused outside for a moment, looking in. Sawdust floor, spittoons by the tipsy-legged tables. A plank bar on sawhorses. A gummy mirror behind it, reflecting the piano player, who wore the inevitable gartered white shirt and who had the inevitable piano-stool slouch. The front of the piano had been removed so you could watch the wooden keys whonk up and

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down as the contraption was played. The bartender was a straw-haired woman wearing a dirty blue dress. One strap was held with a safety pin. There were perhaps six townies in the back of the room, juicing and playing Watch Me apathetically. Another half-dozen were grouped loosely about the piano. Four or five at the bar. And an old man with wild gray hair collapsed at a table by the doors. The gunslinger went in.

Heads swiveled to look at him and his guns. There was a moment of near silence, except for the oblivious piano player, who continued to tinkle. Then the woman mopped at the bar, and things shifted back.

"Watch me," one of the players in the corner said and matched three hearts with four spades, emptying his hand. The one with the hearts swore, handed over his bet, and the next hand was dealt.

The gunslinger approached the bar. "You got hamburger?" he asked.

"Sure." She looked him in the eye, and she might have been pretty when she started out, but now her face was lumpy and there was a livid scar corkscrewed across her forehead. She had powdered it heavily, but it called attention rather than camouflaging. "It's dear, though."

"I figured. Gimme three burgers and a beer."

Again that subtle shift in tone. Three hamburgers. Mouths watered and tongues licked at saliva with slow lust. Three hamburgers.

"That would go you five bucks. With the beer."

The gunslinger put a gold piece on the bar.

Eyes followed it.

There was a sullenly smoldering charcoal brazier behind the bar and to the left of the mirror. The woman disappeared into a small room behind it and returned with meat on a paper. She scrimped out three patties and put them on the fire. The smell that arose was maddening. The gunslinger stood with stolid indifference, only peripherally aware of the faltering piano, the slowing of the card game, the sidelong glances of the barflies.

The man was halfway up behind him when the gunslinger saw him in the mirror. The man was almost completely bald, and his hand was wrapped around the haft of a gigantic hunting knife that was looped onto his belt like a holster.

"Go sit down," the gunslinger said quietly.

The man stopped. His upper lip lifted unconsciously, like a dog's, and there was a moment of silence. Then he went back to his table, and the atmosphere shifted back again.

His beer came in a cracked glass schooner. "I ain't got change for

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gold," the woman said truculently.

"Don't expect any."

She nodded angrily, as if this show of wealth, even at her benefit, incensed her. But she took his gold, and a moment later the hamburgers came on a cloudy plate, still red around the edges.

"Do you have salt?"

She gave it to him from underneath the bar. "Bread?"

"No." He knew she was lying, but he didn't push it. The bald man was staring at him with cyanosed eyes, his hands clenching and unclenching on the splintered and gouged surface of his table. His nostrils flared with pulsating regularity.

The gunslinger began to eat steadily, almost blandly, chopping the meat apart and forking it into his mouth, trying not to think of what might have been added to it to cut the beef.

He was almost through, ready to call for another beer and roll a smoke when the hand fell on his shoulders.

He suddenly became aware that the room had gone silent again, and he tasted thick tension in the air. He turned around and stared into the face of the man who had been asleep by the door when he entered. It was a terrible face. The odor of the devil-grass was a rank miasma. The eyes were damned, the staring, glaring eyes of those who see but do not see, eyes ever turned inward to the sterile hell of dreams beyond control, dreams unleashed, risen out of the stinking swamps of the unconscious to confront sanity with the grinning, death's-head rictus of utter lunacy.

The woman behind the bar made a small moaning sound.

The cracked lips writhed, lifted, revealing the green, mossy teeth, and the gunslinger thought: — He's not even smoking it anymore. He's chewing it. He's really *chewing* it.

And on the heels of that: — He's a dead man. He should have been dead a year ago.

And on the heels of that: — The man in black.

They stared at each other, the gunslinger and the man who peered at the gunslinger from around the rim of madness.

He spoke, and the gunslinger, dumfounded, heard himself addressed in the High Speech:

"The gold for a favor, gunslinger. Just one? For a pretty."

The High Speech. For a moment his mind refused to track it. It had been years — God! — centuries, millenniums; there was no more High Speech, he was the last, the last gunslinger. The others were —

Numbed, he reached into his breast pocket and produced a gold piece. The split, scrabbed hand

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reached for it, fondled it, held it up to reflect the greasy glare of the kerosene lamps. It threw off its proud civilized glow; golden, reddish, bloody.

"Ahhhhhh..." An inarticulate sound of pleasure. The old man did a weaving turn and began moving back to his table, holding the coin at eye level, turning it, flashing it.

The room was emptying rapidly, the batwings shuttling madly back and forth. The piano player closed the lid of his instrument with a bang and exited after the others in long, comic-opera strides.

"Sheb!" The woman screamed after him, her voice an odd mixture of fear and shrewishness, "Sheb, you come back here! Goddammit!"

The old man, meanwhile, had gone back to his table. He spun the gold piece on the gouged wood, and the dead-alive eyes followed it with empty fascination. He spun it a second time, a third, and his eyelids drooped. The fourth time, and his head settled to the wood before the coin stopped.

"There," she said softly, furiously. "You've driven out my trade. Are you satisfied?"

"They'll be back," the gunslinger said.

"Not tonight they won't."

"Who is he?" He gestured at the weed-eater.

"Go —" She completed the command by describing an impossible act of masturbation.

"I have to know," the gunslinger said patiently. "He —"

"He talked to you funny," she said. "Nort never talked like that in his life."

"I'm looking for a man. You would know him."

She stared at him, the anger dying. It was replaced with speculation, then with a high, wet gleam that he had seen before. The rickety building ticked thoughtfully to itself. A dog barked brayingly, far away. The gunslinger waited. She saw his knowledge and the gleam was replaced by hopelessness, by a dumb need that had no mouth.

"You know my price," she said.

He looked at her steadily. The scar would not show in the dark. Her body was lean enough so the desert and grit and grind hadn't been able to sag everything. And she'd once been pretty, maybe even beautiful. Not that it mattered. It would not have mattered if the grave-beetles had nested in the arid blackness of her womb. It had all been written.

Her hands came up to her face and there was still some juice left in her — enough to weep.

"Don't *look!* You don't have to look at me so mean!"

"I'm sorry," the gunslinger said. "I didn't mean to be mean."

"None of you mean it!" She cried at him.

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"Put out the lights."

She wept, hands at her face. He was glad she had her hands at her face. Not because of the scar but because it gave her back her maidenhood, if not head. The pin that held the strap of her dress glittered in the greasy light.

"Put out the lights and lock up. Will he steal anything?"

"No," she whispered.

"Then put out the lights."

She would not remove her hands until she was behind him and she doused the lamps one by one, turning down the wicks and then breathing the flames into extinction. Then she took his hand in the dark and it was warm. She led him upstairs. There was no light to hide their act.

VI

He made cigarettes in the dark, then lit them and passed one to her. The room held her scent, fresh lilac, pathetic. The smell of the desert had overlaid it, crippled it. It was like the smell of the sea. He realized he was afraid of the desert ahead.

"His name is Nort," she said. No harshness had been worn out of her voice. "Just Nort. He died."

The gunslinger waited.

"He was touched by God."

The gunslinger said, "I have never seen Him."

"He was here ever since I can remember — Nort I mean, not God." She laughed jaggedly into the dark. "He had a honeywagon for a while. Started to drink. Started to smell the grass. Then to smoke it. The kids started to follow him around and sic their dogs onto him. He wore old green pants that stank. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"He started to chew it. At the last he just sat in there and didn't eat anything. He might have been a king, in his mind. The children might have been his jesters, and the dogs his princes."

"Yes."

"He died right in front of this place," she said. "He came clumping down the boardwalk — his boots wouldn't wear out, they were engineer boots — with the children and dogs behind him. He looked like wire clothes hangers all wrapped and twirled together. You could see all the lights of hell in his eyes, but he was grinning, just like the grins the children carve into their pumpkins on All-Saints Eve. You could smell the dirt and the rot and the weed. It was running down from the corners of his mouth like green blood. I think he meant to come in and listen to Sheb play the piano. And right in front, he stopped and cocked his head. I could see him, and I thought he heard a coach, although there was none due. Then he puked, and it was

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black and full of blood. It went right through that grin like sewer water through a grate. The stink was enough to make you want to run mad. He raised up his arms and just threw over. That was all. He died with that grin on his face, in his own vomit."

She was trembling beside him. Outside, the wind kept up its steady whine, and somewhere far away a door was banging, like a sound heard in a dream. Mice ran in the walls. The gunslinger thought in the back of his mind that it was probably the only place in town prosperous enough to support mice. He put a hand on her belly and she started violently, then relaxed.

"The man in black," he said.

"You have to have it, don't you!"

"Yes."

"All right. I'll tell you." She grasped his hand in both of hers and told him.

VII

He came in the late afternoon of the day Nort died, and the wind was whooping up, pulling away the loose topsoil, sending sheets of grit and uprooted stalks of corn windmilling past. Kennerly had padlocked the livery, and the other few merchants had shuttered their windows and laid boards across the shutters. The sky was the yellow color of old cheese and the clouds moved flyingly across it, as if they had seen something horrifying in the desert wastes where they had so lately been.

He came in a rickety rig with a rippling tarp tied across its bed. They watched him come, and old man Kennerly, lying by the window with a bottle in one hand and the loose, hot flesh of his second-eldest daughter's left breast in the other, resolved not to be there if he should knock.

But the man in black went by without hawing the bay that pulled his rig, and the spinning wheels spumed up dust that the wind clutched eagerly. He might have been a priest or a monk; he wore a black cassock that had been floured with dust, and a loose hood covered his head and obscured his features. It rippled and flapped. Beneath the garment's hem, heavy buckled boots with square toes.

He pulled up in front of Sheb's and tethered the horse, which lowered its head and grunted at the ground. Around the back of the rig, he untied one flap, found a weathered saddlebag, threw it over his shoulder, and went in through the batwings.

Alice watched him curiously, but no one else noticed his arrival. The rest were drunk as lords. Sheb was playing Methodist hymns ragtime, and the grizzled layabouts

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who had come in early to avoid the storm and to attend Nort's wake had sung themselves hoarse. Sheb, drunk nearly to the point of senselessness, intoxicated and horny with his own continued existence, played with hectic, shuttlecock speed, fingers flying like looms.

Voices screeched and hollered, never overcoming the wind but sometimes seeming to challenge it. In the corner Zachary had thrown Amy Feldon's skirts over her head and was painting zodiac signs on her knees. A few other women circulated. A fervid glow seemed to be on all of them. The dull stormglow that filtered through the batwings seemed to mock them, however.

Nort had been laid out on two tables in the center of the room. His boots made a mystical V. His mouth hung open in a slack grin, although someone had closed his eyes and put slugs on them. His hands had been folded on his chest with a sprig of devil-grass in them. He smelled like poison.

The man in black pushed back his hood and came to the bar. Alice watched him, feeling trepidation mixed with the familiar want that hid within her. There was no religious symbol on him, although that meant nothing by itself.

"Whiskey," he said. His voice was soft and pleasant. "Good whiskey."

She reached under the counter and brought out a bottle of Star. She could have palmed off the local popskull on him as her best, but did not. She poured, and the man in black watched her. His eyes were large, luminous. The shadows were too thick to determine their color exactly. Her need intensified. The hollering and whooping went on behind, unabated. Sheb, the worthless gelding, was playing about the Christian Soldiers and somebody had persuaded Aunt Mill to sing. Her voice, warped and distorted, cut through the babble like a dull ax through a calf's brain.

"Hey, Allie!"

She went to serve, resentful of the stranger's silence, resentful of his no-color eyes and her own restless groin. She was afraid of her needs. They were capricious and beyond her control. They might be the signal of the change, which would in turn signal the beginning of her old age — a condition which in Tull was usually as short and bitter as a winter sunset.

She drew beer until the keg was empty, then broached another. She knew better than to ask Sheb; he would come willingly enough, like the dog he was, and would either chop off his own fingers or spume beer all over everything. The stranger's eyes were on her as she went about it; she could feel them.

"It's busy," he said when she returned. He had not touched his

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drink, merely rolled it between his palms to warm it.

"Wake," she said.

"I noticed the departed."

"They're bums," she said with sudden hatred. "All bums."

"It excites them. He's dead. They're not."

"He was their butt when he was alive. It's not right now. It's..." She trailed off, not able to express what it was, or how it was obscene.

"Weed-eater?"

"Yes. What else did he have?" Her tone was accusing, but he did not drop his eyes, and she felt the blood rush to her face. "I'm sorry. Are you a priest? This must revolt you."

"I'm not and it doesn't." He knocked the whiskey back neatly and did not grimace. "Once more, please."

"I'll have to see the color of your coin first. I'm sorry."

"No need to be."

He put a rough silver coin on the counter, thick on one edge, thin on the other, and she said as she would say later: "I don't have change for this."

He shook his head, dismissing it, and watched absently as she poured again.

"Are you only passing through?" she asked.

He did not reply for a long time, and she was about to repeat when he shook his head impatiently. "Don't talk trivialities. You're here with death."

She recoiled, hurt and amazed, her first thought being that he had lied about his holiness to test her.

"You cared for him," he said flatly. "Isn't that true?"

"Who? Nort?" She laughed, affecting annoyance to cover her confusion. "I think you better —"

"You're soft-hearted and a little afraid," he went on, "and he was on the weed, looking out hell's back door. And there he is, and they've even slammed the door now, and you don't think they'll open it until it's time for you to walk through, isn't it so?"

"What are you, drunk?"

"Mistuh Norton, he dead," the man in black intoned sardonically. "Dead as anybody. Dead as you or anybody."

"Get out of my place." She felt a trembling loathing spring up in her, but the warmth still radiated from her belly.

"It's all right," he said softly. "It's all right. Wait. Just wait."

The eyes were blue. She felt suddenly easy in her mind, as if she had taken a drug.

"See?" he asked her. "Do you see?"

She nodded dumbly and he laughed aloud — a fine, strong, untainted laugh that swung heads around. He whirled and faced them, suddenly made the center of

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attention by some unknown alchemy. Aunt Mill faltered and subsided, leaving a cracked high note bleeding on the air. Sheb struck a discord and halted. They looked at the stranger uneasily. Sand rattled against the sides of the building.

The silence held, spun itself out. Her breath had clogged in her throat and she looked down and saw both hands pressed to her belly beneath the bar. They all looked at him and he looked at them. Then the laugh burst forth again, strong, rich, beyond denial. But there was no urge to laugh along with him.

"I'll show you a wonder!" he cried at them. But they only watched him, like obedient children taken to see a magician in whom they have grown too old to believe.

The man in black sprang forward, and Aunt Mill drew away from him. He grinned fiercely and slapped her broad belly. A short, unwitting cackle was forced out of her, and the man in black threw back his head.

"It's better, isn't it?"

Aunt Mill cackled again, suddenly broke into cracked sobs, and fled blindly through the doors. The others watched her go silently. The storm was beginning; shadows followed each other, rising and falling on the giant white cyclorama of the sky. A man near the piano with a forgotten beer in one hand made a groaning, grinning sound.

The man in black stood over Nort, grinning down at him. The wind howled and shrieked and thrummed. Something large struck the side of the building and bounced away. One of the men at the bar tore himself free and exited in looping, grotesque strides. Thunder racketed in sudden dry vollies.

"All right," the man in black grinned. "All right, here we go."

He began to spit into Nort's face, aiming carefully. The spittle gleamed in the cut troughs of his forehead, pearled down the shaven beak of his nose.

Under the bar, her hands worked faster.

Sheb laughed, loon-like, and hunched over. He began to cough up phlegm, huge and sticky gobs of it, and let fly. The man in black roared approval and pounded him on the back. Sheb grinned, one gold tooth twinkling.

Others fled. Others gathered in a loose ring around Nort. His face and the dewlapped rooster-wrinkles of his neck and upper chest gleamed with liquid — liquid so precious in this dry country. And suddenly it stopped, as if on signal. There was ragged, heavy breathing.

The man in black suddenly lunged across the body, jackknifing over it in a smooth arc. It was pretty, like a flash of water. He caught himself on his hands, sprang to his feet in a twist, grinning, and went

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over again. One of the watchers forgot himself, began to applaud, and suddenly backed away, eyes cloudy with terror. He slobbered a hand across his mouth and made for the door.

Nort twitched the third time the man in black went across.

A sound went through the watchers — a grunt — and then they were silent. The man in black threw his head back and howled. His chest moved in a quick, shallow rhythm as he sucked air. He began to go back and forth at a faster clip, pouring over Nort's body like water poured from one glass to another glass. The only sound in the room was the tearing rasp of his respiration and the rising pulse of the storm.

Nort drew a deep, dry breath. His hands rattled and pounded aimlessly on the table. Sheb screeched and exited. One of the women followed him.

The man in black went across once more, twice, thrice. The whole body was vibrating now, trembling and rapping and twitching. The smell of rot and excrement and decay billowed up in choking waves. His eyes opened.

Alice felt her feet propelling her backward. She struck the mirror, making it shiver, and blind panic took over. She bolted like a steer.

"I've given it to you," the man in black called after her, panting. "Now you can sleep easy. Even *that* isn't irreversible. Although it's ... so ... goldamned ... *funny!*" And he began to laugh again. The sound faded as she raced up the stairs, grunting and heaving, not stopping until the door to the three rooms above the bar was bolted.

She began to giggle then, rocking back and forth on her haunches by the door. The sound rose to a keening wail that mixed with the wind.

Downstairs, Nort wandered absently out into the storm to pull some weed. The man in black, now the only patron of the bar, watched him go, still grinning.

When she forced herself to go back down that evening, carrying a lamp in one hand and a heavy stick of stovewood in the other, the man in black was gone, rig and all. But Nort was there, sitting at the table by the door as if he had never been away. The smell of the weed was on him, but not as heavily as she might have expected.

He looked up at her and smiled tentatively. "Hello, Allie."

"Hello, Nort." She put the stovewood down and began lighting the lamps, not turning her back to him.

"I been touched by God," he said presently. "I ain't going to die no more. He said so. It was a promise."

"How nice for you, Nort." The

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spill she was holding dropped through her trembling fingers and she picked it up.

"I'd like to stop chewing the grass," he said. "I don't enjoy it no more. It don't seem right for a man touched by God to be chewing the weed."

"Then why don't you stop?"

Her exasperation startled her into looking at him as a man again, rather than an infernal miracle. What she saw was a rather sad-looking specimen only half-high, looking hangdog and ashamed. She could not be frightened by him anymore.

"I shake," he said. "And I want it. I can't stop. Allie, you was always so good to me —" he began to weep. "I can't even stop peeing myself."

She walked to the table and hesitated there, uncertain.

"He could have made me not want it," he said through the tears. "He could have done that if he could have made me be alive. I ain't complaining ... I don't want to complain ..." He stared around hauntedly and whispered, "He might strike me dead if I did."

"Maybe it's a joke. He seemed to have quite a sense of humor."

Nort took his poke from where it dangled inside his shirt and brought out a handful of grass. Unthinkingly she knocked it away and then drew her hand back, horrified.

"I can't help it, Allie, I can't —" and he made a crippled dive for the poke. She could have stopped him, but she made no effort. She went back to lighting the lamps, tired although the evening had barely begun. But nobody came in that night except old man Kennerly, who had missed everything. He did not seem particularly surprised to see Nort. He ordered beer, asked where Sheb was, and pawed her. The next day things were almost normal, although none of the children followed Nort. The day after that, the catcalls resumed. Life had gotten back on its own sweet keel. The uprooted corn was gathered together by the children, and a week after Nort's resurrection, they burned it in the middle of the street. The fire was momentarily bright and most of the barflies stepped or staggered out to watch. They looked primitive. Their faces seemed to float between the flames and the ice-chip brilliance of the sky. Allie watched them and felt a pang of fleeting despair for the sad times of the world. Things had stretched apart. There was no glue at the center of things anymore. She had never seen the ocean, never would.

"If I had *guts,*" she murmured, "If I had guts, guts, *guts*..."

Nort raised his head at the sound of her voice and smiled emptily at her from hell. She had no

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guts. Only a bar and a scar.

The fire burned down rapidly and the barflies came back in. She began to dose herself with the Star Whiskey, and by midnight she was blackly drunk.

VIII

She ceased her narrative, and when he made no immediate comment, she thought at first that the story had put him to sleep. She had begun to drowse herself when he asked: "That's all?"

"Yes. That's all. It's very late."

"Um." He was rolling another cigarette.

"Don't get crumbs in my bed," she told him, more sharply than she had intended.

"No."

Silence again, as if all possible words between them had been exhausted. The tip of his cigarette winked off and on.

"You'll be leaving in the morning," she said dully.

"I should. I think he's left a trap for me here. A snare."

"Don't go," she said.

"We'll see."

He turned on his side away from her, but she was comforted. He would stay. She drowsed.

On the edge of sleep she thought again about the way Nort had addressed him, in that strange talk. She had not seen him express emotion before or since. Even his lovemaking had been a silent thing, and only at the last had his breathing roughened and then stopped for a minute. He was like something out of a fairytale or a myth, the last of his breed in a world that was writing the last page of its book. It didn't matter. He would stay for a while. Tomorrow was time enough to think, or the day after that. She slept.

IX

In the morning she cooked him grits which he ate without comment. He shoveled them into his mouth without thinking about her, hardly seeing her. He knew he should go. Every minute he sat here the man in black was further away — probably into the desert by now. His path had been undeviatingly south.

"Do you have a map?" he asked suddenly, looking up.

"Of the town?" She laughed. "There isn't enough of it to need a map."

"No. Of what's south of here."

Her smile faded. "The desert. Just the desert. I thought you'd stay for a little."

"What's south of the desert?"

"How would I know? Nobody crosses it. Nobody's tried since I was here." She wiped her hands on her apron, got potholders, and dumped the tub of water she had been heating into the sink, where it

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splashed and steamed.

He got up.

"Where are you going?" She heard the shrill fear in her voice and hated it.

"To the stable. If anyone knows, the hostler will." He put his hands on her shoulders. The hands were warm. "And to arrange for my mule. If I'm going to be here, he should be taken care of. For when I leave."

But not yet. She looked up at him. "But you watch that Kennerly. If he doesn't know a thing, he'll make it up."

When he left she turned to the sink, feeling the hot, warm drift of her grateful tears.

X

Kennerly was toothless, unpleasant, and plagued with daughters. Two half-grown ones peeked at the gunslinger from the dusty shadows of the barn. A baby drooled happily in the dirt. A full-grown one, blonde, dirty, sensual, watched with a speculative curiosity as she drew water from the groaning pump beside the building.

The hostler met him halfway between the door to his establishment and the street. His manner vacillated between hostility and a craven sort of fawning — like a stud mongrel that has been kicked too often.

"It's bein' cared for," he said, and before the gunslinger could reply, Kennerly turned on his daughter: "You get in, Soobie! You get right the hell in!"

Soobie began to drag her bucket sullenly toward the shack appended to the barn.

"You meant my mule," the gunslinger said.

"Yes, sir. Ain't seen a mule in quite a time. Time was they used to grow up wild for want of 'em, but the world has moved on. Ain't seen nothin' but a few oxen and the coach horses and ... Soobie, I'll whale you, 'fore God!"

"I don't bite," the gunslinger said pleasantly.

Kennerly cringed a little. "It ain't you. No, sir, it ain't *you.*" He grinned loosely. "She's just naturally gawky. She's got a devil. She's wild." His eyes darkened. "It's coming to Last Times, mister. You know how it says in the Book. Children won't obey their parents, and a plague'll be visited on the multitudes."

The gunslinger nodded, then pointed south. "What's out there?"

Kennerly grinned again, showing gums and a few sociable yellow teeth. "Dwellers. Weed. Desert. What else?" He cackled, and his eyes measured the gunslinger coldly.

"How big is the desert?"

"Big." His grin was serious, Kennerly endeavored to look ser-

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ious. But the layers of secret humor and fear and ingratiation vied beneath the skin in a moiling confusion.

"Maybe three hundred miles. Maybe a thousand. I can't tell you, mister. There's nothing out there but devil-grass and maybe demons. That's the way the other fella went. The one who fixed up Norty when he was sick."

Kennerly kept grinning. "Well, well. Maybe. But we're growed-up men, ain't we?"

"But you believe in demons."

Kennerly looked affronted. "That's a lot different."

The gunslinger took off his hat and wiped his forehead. The sun was hot, beating steadily. Kennerly seemed not to notice. In the thin shadow by the livery, the baby girl was gravely smearing dirt on her face.

"You don't know what's after the desert?"

Kennerly shrugged. "Some might. The coach ran through part of it fifty years ago. My pap said so. He used to say 'twas mountains. Others say an ocean ... a green ocean with monsters. And some say that's where the world ends. That there ain't nothing but lights that'll drive a man blind and the face of God with his mouth open to eat them up."

"Drivel," the gunslinger said shortly.

"Sure it is." Kennerly cringed again, hating, fearing, wanting to please.

"You see my mule is looked after." He flicked Kennerly another coin, which Kennerly caught on the fly.

"Surely. You stayin' a little?"

"I guess I might."

"That Allie's pretty nice when she wants to be, ain't she?"

"Did you say something?" The gunslinger asked remotely.

Sudden terror dawned in Kennerly's eyes, like twin moons coming over the horizon. "No, sir, not a word. And I'm sorry if I did." He caught sight of Soobie leaning out a window and whirled on her. "I'll whale you now, you little slut-face! 'Fore God! I'll —"

The gunslinger walked away, aware that Kennerly had turned to watch him, aware of the fact that he could whirl and catch the hostler with some true and untinctured emotion distilled on his face. He let it slip. It was hot. The only sure thing about the desert was its size. And it wasn't all played out in this town. Not yet.

XI

They were in bed when Sheb kicked the door open and came in with the knife.

It had been four days, and they had gone by in a blinking haze. He ate. He slept. He made sex with

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Allie. He found that she played the fiddle and he made her play it for him. She sat by the window in the milky light of daybreak, only a profile, and played something haltingly that might have been good if she had been trained. He felt a growing (but strangely absent-minded) affection for her and thought this might be the trap the man in black had left behind. He read dry and tattered back issues of magazines with faded pictures. He thought very little about everything.

He didn't hear the little piano player come up — his reflexes had sunk. That didn't seem to matter either, although it would have frightened him badly in another time and place.

Allie was naked, the sheet below her breasts, and they were preparing to make love.

"Please," she was saying. "Like before, I want that, I want —"

The door crashed open and the piano player made his ridiculous, knock-kneed run for the sun. Allie did not scream, although Sheb held an eight-inch carving knife in his hand. Sheb was making a noise, an inarticulate blabbering. He sounded like a man being drowned in a bucket of mud. Spittle flew. He brought the knife down with both hands, and the gunslinger caught his wrists and turned them. The knife went flying. Sheb made a high screeching noise, like a rusty screen door. His hands made fluttering marionette movements, both wrists broken. The wind gritted against the window. Allie's glass on the wall, faintly clouded and distorted, reflected the room.

"She was mine!" He wept. "She was mine first! Mine!"

Allie looked at him and got out of bed. She put on a wrapper, and the gunslinger felt a moment of empathy for a man who must be seeing himself coming out on the far end of what he once had. He was just a little man, and gelded.

"It was for you," Sheb sobbed. "It was only for you, Allie. It was you first and it was all for you. I — ah, oh God, dear God —" The words dissolved into a paroxysm of unintelligibilities, finally to tears. He rocked back and forth, holding his broken wrists to his belly.

"Shhh. Shhh. Let me see." She knelt beside him. "Broken. Sheb, you donkey. Didn't you know you were never strong?" She helped him to his feet. He tried to hold his hands to his face, but they would not obey, and he wept nakedly. "Come on over to the table and let me see what I can do."

She led him to the table and set his wrists with slats of kindling from the fire box. He wept weakly and without volition, and left without looking back.

She came back to the bed. "Where were we?"

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"No," he said.

She said patiently, "You knew about that. There's nothing to be done. What else is there?" She touched his shoulder. "Except I'm glad that you are so strong."

"Not now," he said thickly.

"I can make you strong —"

"No," he said. "You can't do that."

XII

The next night the bar was closed. It was whatever passed for the Sabbath in Tull. The gunslinger went to the tiny, leaning church by the graveyard while Allie washed tables with strong disinfectant and rinsed kerosene lamp chimnies in soapy water.

An odd purple dusk had fallen, and the church, lit from the inside, looked almost like a blast furnace from the road.

"I don't go," Allie had said shortly. "The woman who preaches has poison religion. Let the respectable ones go."

He stood in the vestibule, hidden in a shadow, looking in. The pews were gone and the congregation stood (he saw Kennerly and his brood; Castner, owner of the town's scrawny dry-goods emporium and his slat-sided wife; a few barflies; a few "town" women he had never seen before; and, surprisingly, Sheb). They were singing a hymn raggedly, *a cappella*. He looked curiously at the mountainous woman at the pulpit. Allie had said: "She lives alone, hardly ever sees anybody. Only comes out on Sunday to serve up the hellfire. Her name is Sylvia Pittston. She's crazy, but she's got the hoodoo on them. They like it that way. It suits them."

No description could take the measure of the woman. Breasts like earthworks. A huge pillar of a neck overtopped by a pasty white moon of a face, in which blinked eyes so large and so dark that they seemed to be bottomless tarns. Her hair was a beautiful rich brown and it was piled atop her head in a haphazard, lunatic sprawl, held by a hairpin big enough to be a meat skewer. She wore a dress that seemed to be made of burlap. The arms that held the hymnal were slabs. Her skin was creamy, unmarked, lovely. He thought that she must top three hundred pounds. He felt a sudden red lust for her that made him feel shaky, and he turned his head and looked away.

"Shall we gather at the river,
The beautiful, the beautiful,
The riiiiver,
Shall we gather at the river,
That flows by the Kingdom of
God."

The last note of the last chorus faded off, and there was a moment of shuffling and coughing.

She waited. When they were set-

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tled, she spread her hands over them, as if in benediction. It was an evocative gesture.

"My dear little brothers and sisters in Christ."

It was a haunting line. For a moment the gunslinger felt mixed feelings of nostalgia and fear, stitched in with an eerie feeling of *deja vu* — he thought: I dreamed this. When? He shook it off. The audience — perhaps twenty-five all told — had become dead silent.

"The subject of our meditation tonight is The Interloper." Her voice was sweet, melodious, the speaking voice of a well-trained soprano.

A little rustle ran through the audience.

"I feel," Sylvia Pittston said reflectively, "I feel that I know everyone in The Book personally. In the last five years I have worn out five Bibles, and uncountable numbers before that. I love the story, and I love the players in that story. I have walked arm in arm in the lion's den with Daniel. I stood with David when he was tempted by Bathsheba as she bathed at the pool. I have been in the fiery furnace with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. I slew two thousand with Samson and was blinded with St. Paul on the road to Damascus. I wept with Mary at Golgotha."

A soft, shurring sigh in the audience.

"I have known and loved them. There is only one — *one* —" she held up a finger — "only one player in the greatest of all dramas that I do not know. Only *one* who stands outside with his face in the shadow. Only *one* that makes my body tremble and my spirit quail. I fear him. I don't know his mind and I fear him. I fear The Interloper."

Another sigh. One of the women had put a hand over her mouth as if to stop a sound and was rocking, rocking.

"The Interloper who came to Eve as a snake on its belly, grinning and writhing. The Interloper who walked among the Children of Israel while Moses was up on the Mount, who whispered to them to make a golden idol, a golden calf, and to worship it with foulness and fornication."

Moans, nods.

"The Interloper! He stood on the balcony with Jezebel and watched as King Ahaz fell screaming to his death, and he and she grinned as the dogs gathered and lapped up his life's blood. Oh, my little brothers and sisters, watch thou for The Interloper."

"Yes, O Jesus —" The man the gunslinger had first noticed coming into town, the one with the straw hat.

"He's always been there, my brothers and sisters. But I don't know his mind. And you don't

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know his mind. Who could understand the awful darkness that swirls there, the pride like pylons, the titanic blasphemy, the unholy glee? And the madness! The cyclopean, gibbering madness that walks and crawls and wriggles through men's most awful wants and desires?"

"O Jesus Savior —"

"It was *him* who took our Lord up on the mountain —"

"Yes —"

"It was *him* that tempted him and shewed him all the world and the world's pleasures —"

"Yesss —"

"It's *him* that will come back when Last Times come on the world ... and they are coming, my brothers and sisters, can't you feel they are?"

"Yesss —"

Rocking and sobbing, the congregation became a sea; the woman seemed to point at all of them, none of them.

"It's *him* that will come as the Antichrist, to lead men into the flaming bowels of perdition, to the bloody end of wickedness, as Star Wormwood hangs blazing in the sky, as gall gnaws at the vitals of the children, as women's wombs give forth monstrosities, as the works of men's hands turn to blood —"

"Ahhh —"

"Ah, God —"

"Gawwwwwwww —"

A woman fell on the floor, her legs crashing up and down against the wood. One of her shoes flew off.

"It's *him* that stands behind every fleshly pleasure ... *him!* The Interloper!"

"Yes, Lord!"

A man fell on his knees, holding his head and braying.

"When you take a drink, who holds the bottle?"

"The Interloper!"

"When you sit down to a faro or a Watch Me table, who turns the cards?"

"The Interloper!"

"When you riot in the flesh of another's body, when you pollute yourself, who are you selling your soul to?"

"In —"

"The —"

"Oh, Jesus ... Oh —"

"— loper —"

"— Aw ... Aw ... Aw ..."

"And who is he?" She screamed (but calm within, he could sense the calmness, the mastery, the control, the domination. He thought suddenly, with terror and absolute surety: he has left a demon in her. She is haunted. He felt the hot ripple of sexual desire again through his fear.)

The man who was holding his head crashed and blundered forward.

"I'm in hell!" He screamed up at her. His face twisted and writhed

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as if snakes crawled beneath his skin. "I done fornications! I done gambling! I done weed! I done *sins!* I —" But his voice rose skyward in a dreadful, hysterical wail that drowned articulation. He held his head as if it would burst like an overripe cantaloupe at any moment.

The audience stilled as if a cue had been given, frozen in their half-erotic poses of ecstasy.

Sylvia Pittston reached down and grasped his head. The man's cry ceased as her fingers, strong and white, unblemished and gentle, worked through his hair. He looked up at her dumbly.

"Who was with you in sin?" She asked. Her eyes looked into his, deep enough, gentle enough, cold enough to drown in.

"The ... the Interloper."

"Called who?"

"Called Satan." Raw, oozing whisper.

"Will you renounce?"

Eagerly: "Yes! Yes! Oh, my Jesus Savior!"

She rocked his head; he stared at her with the blank, shiny eyes of the zealot. "If he walked through that door —" she hammered a finger at the vestibule shadows where the gunslinger stood — "would you renounce him to his face?"

"On my mother's name!"

"Do you believe in the eternal love of Jesus?"

He began to weep. "Your fucking-a I do —"

"He forgives you that, Jonson."

"Praise God," Jonson said, still weeping, unaware of what he had said or done.

"I know he forgives you just as I know he will cast out the unrepentant from his palaces and into the place of burning darkness."

"*Praise God.*" The congregation, drained, spoke it solemnly.

"Just as I know this Interloper, this Satan, this Lord of Flies and Serpents will be cast down and crushed ... will you crush him if you see him, Jonson?"

"Yes and praise God!" Jonson wept.

"Will you crush him if you see him, brothers and sisters?"

"Yess..." Sated.

"If you see him sashaying down Main St. tomorrow?"

"Praise God..."

The gunslinger, amused and unsettled at the same time, faded back out the door and headed for town. The smell of the desert was clear in the air. Almost time to move on. Almost.

XIII

In bed again.

"She won't see you," Allie said. She sounded frightened. "She doesn't see anybody. She only comes out on Sunday evenings to scare the hell out of everybody."

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"How long has she been here?"

"Twelve years or so. Let's not talk about her."

"Where did she come from? Which direction?"

"I don't know." Lying.

"Allie?"

"*I don't know!*"

"Allie?"

"All right! All right! She came from the dwellers! From the desert!"

"I thought so." He relaxed a little. "Where does she live?"

Her voice dropped a notch. "If I tell you, will you make love to me?"

"You know the answer to that."

She sighed. It was an old, yellow sound, like turning pages. "She has a house over the knoll in back of the church. A little shack. It's where the ... the real minister used to live until he moved out. Is that enough? Are you satisfied?"

"No. Not yet." And he rolled on top of her.

XIV

It was the last day, and he knew it.

The sky was an ugly, bruised purple, weirdly lit from above with the first fingers of dawn. Allie moved about like a wraith, lighting lamps, tending the corn fritters that spluttered in the skillet. He had loved her hard after she had told him what he had to know, and she had sensed the coming end and had given more than she had ever given, and she had given it with desperation against the coming of dawn, given it with the tireless energy of sixteen. And she was pale this morning, on the brink of menopause again.

She served him without a word. He ate rapidly, chewing, swallowing, chasing each bite with hot coffee. Allie went to the batwings and stood staring out at the morning, at the silent battalions of slow-moving clouds.

"It's going to dust up today."

"I'm not surprised."

"Are you ever?" She asked ironically, and turned to watch him get his hat. He clapped it on his head and brushed past her.

"Sometimes," he told her. He only saw her once more alive.

XV

By the time he reached Sylvia Pittston's shack, the wind had died utterly and the whole world seemed to wait. He had been in desert country long enough to know that the longer the lull, the harder the wind would blow when it finally decided to start up. A queer, flat light hung over everything.

There was a large wooden cross nailed to the door of the place, which was leaning and tired. He rapped and waited. No answer. He rapped again. No answer. He drew back and kicked in the door with

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one hard shot of his right boot. A small bolt on the inside ripped free. The door banged against a haphazardly planked wall and scared rats into skittering flight. Sylvia Pittston sat in the hall, sat in a mammoth darkwood rocker, and looked at him calmly with those great and dark eyes. The stormlight fell on her cheeks in terrifying half-tones. She wore a shawl. The rocker made tiny squeaking noises.

They looked at each other for a long, clockless moment.

"You will never catch him," she said. "You walk in the way of evil."

"He came to you," the gunslinger said.

"And to my bed. He spoke to me in the Tongue. He —"

"He screwed you."

She did not flinch. "You walk an evil way, gunslinger. You stand in shadows. You stood in the shadows of the holy place last night. Did you think I couldn't see you?"

"Why did he heal the weed-eater?"

"He was an angel of God. He said so."

"I hope he smiled when he said it."

She drew her lip back from her teeth in an unconsciously feral gesture. "He told me you would follow. He told me what to do. He said you are the Antichrist."

The gunslinger shook his head. "He didn't say that."

She smiled up at him lazily. "He said you would want to bed me. Do you?"

"Yes."

"The price is your life, gunslinger. He has got me with child ... the child of an angel. If you invade me —" She let the lazy smile complete her thought. At the same time she gestured with her huge, mountainous thighs. They stretched beneath her garment like pure marble slabs. The effect was dizzying.

The gunslinger dropped his hands to the butts of his pistols. "You have a demon, woman. I can remove it."

The effect was instantaneous. She recoiled against the chair, and a weasel look flashed on her face. "Don't touch me! Don't come near me! You dare not touch the Bride of God!"

"Blow it out," the gunslinger said, grinning. He stepped toward her.

The flesh on the huge frame quaked. Her face had become a caricature of crazed terror, and she stabbed the sign of the Eye at him with pronged fingers.

"The desert," the gunslinger said. "What after the desert?"

"You'll never catch him! Never! Never! You'll burn! He told me so!"

"I'll catch him," the gunslinger said. "We both know it. What is beyond the desert?"

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"No!"

"Answer me!"

"No!"

He slid forward, dropped to his knees, and grabbed her thighs. Her legs locked like a vise. She made strange, lustful keening noises.

"The demon, then," he said.

"*No —*"

He pried the legs apart and unholstered one of his guns.

"No! No! No!" Her breath came in short, savage grunts.

"Answer me."

She rocked in the chair and the floor trembled. Prayers and garbled bits of jargon flew from her lips.

He rammed the barrel of the gun forward. He could feel the terrified wind sucked into her lungs more than he could hear it. Her hands beat at his head; her legs drummed against the floor. And at the same time the huge body tried to take the invader and enwomb it. Outside nothing watched them but the bruised sky.

She screamed something, high and inarticulate.

"What?"

"*Mountains!*"

"What about them?"

"He stops ... on the other side ... s-s-sweet *Jesus!* ... to m-make his strength. Med-m-meditation, do you understand? Oh ... I'm ... I'm ..."

The whole huge mountain of flesh suddenly strained forward and upward, yet he was careful not to let her secret flesh touch him.

Then she seemed to wilt and grow smaller, and she wept with her hands in her lap.

"So," he said, getting up. "The demon is served, eh?"

"Get out. You've killed the child. Get out. Get out."

He stopped at the door and looked back. "No child," he said briefly. "No angel, no demon."

"Leave me alone."

He did.

XVI

By the time he arrived at Kennerly's, a queer obscurity had come over the northern horizon and he knew it was dust. Over Tull the air was still dead quiet.

Kennerly was waiting for him on the chaff-strewn stage that was the floor of his barn. "Leaving?" He grinned abjectly at the gunslinger.

"Yes."

"Not before the storm?"

"Ahead of it."

"The wind goes faster than a man on a mule. In the open it can kill you."

"I'll want the mule now," the gunslinger said simply.

"Sure." But Kennerly did not turn away, merely stood as if searching for something further to say, grinning his groveling, hate-filled grin, and his eyes flicked up

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and over the gunslinger's shoulder.

The gunslinger sidestepped and turned at the same time, and the heavy stick of stovewood that the girl Soobie held swished through the air, grazing his elbow only. She lost hold of it with the force of her swing and it clattered over the floor. In the explosive height of the loft, barnswallows took shadowed wing.

The girl looked at him bovinely. Her breasts thrust with overripe grandeur at the wash-faded shirt she wore. One thumb sought the haven of her mouth with dreamlike slowness.

The gunslinger turned back to Kennerly. The grin was huge. His skin was waxy yellow. His eyes rolled in their sockets. "I —" he began in a phlegm-filled whisper and could not continue.

"The mule," the gunslinger prodded gently.

"Sure, sure, sure," Kennerly whispered, the grin now touched with incredulity. He shuffled after it.

He moved to where he could watch Kennerly. The hostler brought the mule back and handed him the bridle. "You get in an' tend your sister," he said to Soobie.

Soobie tossed her head and didn't move.

The gunslinger left them there, staring at each other across the dusty, droppings-strewn floor, he with his sick grin, she with dumb, animal defiance. Outside the heat was still like a hammer.

XVII

He walked the mule up the center of the street, his boots sending up squirts of dust. His waterbags were strapped across the mule's back.

He stopped at Sheb's, and Allie was not there. The place was deserted, battened for the storm, but still dirty from the night before. She had not begun her cleaning and the place was as fetid as a wet dog.

He filled his tote sack with corn meal, dried and roasted corn, and half of the raw hamburg in the cooler. He left four gold pieces stacked on the planked counter. Allie did not come down. Sheb's piano bid him a silent, yellow-toothed good-by. He stepped back out and cinched the tote sack across the mule's back. There was a tight feeling in his throat. He might still avoid the trap, but the chances were small. He was, after all, the interloper.

He walked past the shuttered, waiting buildings, feeling the eyes that peered through cracks and chinks. The man in black had played God in Tull. Was it only a sense of the cosmic comic, or a matter of desperation? It was a question of some importance.

There was a shrill, harried

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scream from behind him, and doors suddenly threw themselves open. Forms lunged. The trap was sprung, then. Men in longhandles and men in dirty dungarees. Women in slacks and in faded dresses. Even children, tagging after their parents. And in every hand there was a chunk of wood or a knife.

His reaction was automatic, instantaneous, inbred. He whirled on his heels while his hands pulled the guns from their holsters, the hafts heavy and sure in his hands. It was Allie, and of course it had to be Allie, coming at him with her face distorted, the scar a hellish, distorted purple in the lowering light. He saw that she was held hostage; the distorted, grimacing face of Sheb peered over her shoulder like a witch's familiar. She was his shield and sacrifice. He saw it all, clear and shadowless in the frozen deathless light of the sterile calm, and heard her:

"He's got me O Jesus don't shoot don't don't *don't* —"

But the hands were trained. He was the last of his breed and it was not only his mouth that knew the High Speech. The guns beat their heavy, atonal music into the air. Her mouth flapped and she sagged and the guns fired again. Sheb's head snapped back. They both fell into the dust.

Sticks flew through the air, rained on him. He staggered, fended them off. One with a nail pounded raggedly through it ripped at his arm and drew blood. A man with a beard stubble and sweat-stained armpits lunged flying at him with a dull kitchen knife held in one paw. The gunslinger shot him dead and the man thumped into the street. His teeth clicked audibly as his chin struck.

"SATAN!" Someone was screaming: "THE ACCURSED! BRING HIM DOWN!"

"THE INTERLOPER!" Another voice cried. Sticks rained on him. A knife struck his boot and bounced. "THE INTERLOPER! THE ANTICHRIST!"

He blasted his way through the middle of them, running as the bodies fell, his hands picking the targets with dreadful accuracy. Two men and a woman went down, and he ran through the hole they left.

He led them a feverish parade across the street and toward the rickety general store-barber shop that faced Sheb's. He mounted the boardwalk, turned again, and fired the rest of his loads into the charging crowd. Behind them, Sheb and Allie and the others lay crucified in the dust.

They never hesitated or faltered, although every shot he fired found a vital spot and although they had probably never seen a gun

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except for pictures in old magazines.

He retreated, moving his body like a dancer to avoid the flying missiles. He reloaded as he went, with a rapidity that had also been trained into his fingers. They shuttled busily between gunbelts and cylinders. The mob came up over the boardwalk and he stepped into the general store and rammed the door closed. The large display window to the right shattered inward and three men crowded through. Their faces were zealously blank, their eyes filled with bland fire. He shot them all, and the two that followed them. They fell in the window, hung on the jutting shards of glass, choking the opening.

The door crashed and shuddered with their weight and he could hear *her* voice: "THE KILLER! YOUR SOULS! THE CLOVEN HOOF!"

The door ripped off its hinges and fell straight in, making a flat handclap. Dust puffed up from the floor. Men, women, and children charged him. Spittle and stovewood flew. He shot his guns empty and they fell like ninepins. He retreated, shoving over a flour barrel, rolling it at them, into the barbershop, throwing a pan of boiling water that contained two nicked straight-razors. They came on, screaming with frantic incoherency. From somewhere, Sylvia Pittston exhorted them, her voice rising and falling on blind inflections. He pushed shells into hot chambers, smelling the smells of shave and tonsure, smelling his own flesh as the calluses at the tips of his fingers singed.

He went through the back door and onto the porch. The flat scrubland was at his back now, flatly denying the town that crouched against its huge haunch. Three men hustled around the corner, with large betrayer grins on their faces. They saw him, saw him seeing them, and the grins curdled in the second before he mowed them down. A woman had followed them, howling. She was large and fat and known to the patrons of Sheb's as Aunt Mill. The gunslinger blew her backwards and she landed in a whorish sprawl, her skirt kinked up between her thighs.

He went down the steps and walked backwards into the desert, ten paces, twenty. The back door of the barber shop flew open and they boiled out. He caught a glimpse of Sylvia Pittston. He opened up. They fell in squats, they fell backwards, they tumbled over the railing into the dust. They cast no shadows in the deathless purple light of the day. He realized he was screaming. He had been screaming all along. His eyes felt like cracked ball bearings. His balls had drawn up against his belly. His legs were

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wood. His ears were iron.

The guns were empty and they boiled at him, transmogrified into an Eye and a Hand, and he stood, screaming and reloading, his mind far away and absent, letting his hands do their reloading trick. Could he hold up a hand, tell them he had spent twenty-five years learning this trick and others, tell them of the guns and the blood that had blessed them? Not with his mouth. But his hands could speak their own tale.

They were in throwing range as he finished, and a stick struck him on the forehead and brought blood in abraded drops. In two seconds they would be in gripping distance. In the forefront he saw Kennerly; Kennerly's younger daughter, perhaps eleven; Soobie; two male barflies; a female barfly named Amy Feldon. He let them all have it, and the ones behind them. Their bodies thumped like scarecrows. Blood and brains flew in streamers.

They halted for a moment, startled, the mob face shivering into individual, bewildered faces. A man ran in a large, screaming circle. A woman with blisters on her hands turned her head up and cackled feverishly at the sky. The man whom he had first seen sitting gravely on the steps of the mercantile store made a sudden and amazing load in his pants.

He had time to reload one gun.

Then it was Sylvia Pittston, running at him, waving a wooden cross in each hand. "DEVIL! DEVIL! DEVIL! CHILD-KILLER! MONSTER! DESTROY HIM, BROTHERS AND SISTERS! DESTROY THE CHILD-KILLING INTERLOPER!"

He put a shot into each of the crosspieces, blowing the roods to splinters, and four more into the woman's head. She seemed to accordian into herself and waver like a shimmer of heat.

They all stared at her for a moment in tableau, while the gunslinger's fingers did their reloading trick. The tips of his fingers sizzled and burned. Neat circles were branded into the tips of each one.

There were less of them, now; he had run through them like a mower's sycthe. He thought they would break with the woman dead, but someone threw a knife. The hilt struck him squarely between the eyes and knocked him over. They ran at him in a reaching, vicious clot. He fired his guns empty again, lying in his own spent shells. His head hurt and he saw large brown circles in front of his eyes. He missed one shot, downed eleven.

But they were on him, the ones that were left. He fired the four shells he had reloaded, and then they were beating him, stabbing him. He threw a pair of them off his left arm and rolled away. His hands

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began doing their infallible trick. He was stabbed in the shoulder. He was stabbed in the back. He was hit across the ribs. He was stabbed in the ass. A small boy squirmed at him and made the only deep cut, across the bulge of his calf. The gunslinger blew his head off.

They were scattering and he let them have it again. The ones left began to retreat toward the sand-colored, pitted buildings, and still the hands did their trick, like over-eager dogs that want to do their rolling-over trick for you not once or twice but all night, and the hands were cutting them down as they ran. The last one made it as far as the steps of the barber shop's back porch, and then the gunslinger's bullet took him in the back of the head.

Silence came back in, filling jagged spaces.

The gunslinger was bleeding from perhaps twenty different wounds, all of them shallow except for the cut across his calf. He bound it with a strip of shirt and then straightened and examined his kill.

They trailed in a twisted, zigzagging path from the back door of the barber shop to where he stood. They lay in all positions. None of them seemed to be sleeping.

He followed them back, counting as he went. In the general store one man lay with his arms wrapped lovingly around the cracked candy jar he had dragged down with him.

He ended up where he had started, in the middle of the deserted main street. He had shot and killed thirty-nine men, fourteen women, and five children. He had shot and killed everyone in Tull.

A sickish-sweet odor came to him on the first of the dry, stirring wind. He followed it, then looked up and nodded. The decaying body of Nort was spread-eagled atop the plank roof of Sheb's, crucified with wooden pegs. Mouth and eyes were open. A large and purple cloven hoof had been pressed into the skin of his grimy forehead.

He walked out of town. His mule was standing in a clump of weed about forty yards out along the remnant of the coach road. The gunslinger led it back to Kennerly's stable. Outside, the wind was playing a louder tune. He put the mule up and went back to Sheb's. He found a ladder in the back shed, went up to the roof, and cut Nort down. The body was lighter than a bag of sticks. He tumbled it down to join the common people. Then he went back inside, ate hamburgers and drank three beers while the light failed and the sand began to fly. That night he slept in the bed where he and Allie had lain. He had no dreams. The next morning the wind was gone and the sun was its usual bright and forget-

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ful self. The bodies had gone south with the wind. At midmorning, after he had bound all his cuts, he moved on as well.

XVIII

He thought Brown had fallen asleep. The fire was down to a spark and the bird, Zoltan, had put his head under his wing.

Just as he was about to get up and spread a pallet in the corner, Brown said, "There. You've told it. Do you feel better?"

The gunslinger started. "Why would I feel bad?"

"You're human, you said. No demon. Or did you lie?"

"I didn't lie." He felt the grudging admittance in him: he liked Brown. Honestly did. And he hadn't lied to the dweller in any way. "Who are you, Brown? Really, I mean."

"Just me," he said, unperturbed. "Why do you have to think you're such a mystery?"

The gunslinger lit a smoke without replying.

"I think you're very close to your man in black," Brown said. "Is he desperate?"

"I don't know."

"Are you?"

"Not yet," the gunslinger said. He looked at Brown with a shade of defiance. "I do what I have to do."

"That's good then," Brown said and turned over and went to sleep.

XIX

In the morning Brown fed him and sent him on his way. In the daylight he was an amazing figure with his scrawny, burnt chest, pencil-like collarbones and ringleted shock of red hair. The bird perched on his shoulder.

"The mule?" The gunslinger asked.

"I'll eat it," Brown said.

"Okay."

Brown offered his hand and the gunslinger shook it. The dweller nodded to the south. "Walk easy."

"You know it."

They nodded at each other and then the gunslinger walked away, his body festooned with guns and water. He looked back once. Brown was rooting furiously at his little cornbed. The crow was perched on the low roof of his dwelling like a gargoyle.

XX

The fire was down, and the stars had begun to pale off. The wind walked restlessly. The gunslinger twitched in his sleep and was still again. He dreamed a thirsty dream. In the darkness the shape of the mountains was invisible. The thoughts of guilt had faded. The desert had baked them out. He found himself thinking more and more about Cort, who had taught him to shoot, instead. Cort had known black from white.

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He stirred again and awoke. He blinked at the dead fire with its own shape superimposed over the other, more geometrical one. He was a romantic, he knew it, and he guarded the knowledge jealously.

That, of course, made him think of Cort again. He didn't know where Cort was. The world had moved on.

The gunslinger shouldered his tote sack and moved on with it.

(Thus ends what is written in the first Book of Roland, and his Quest for the Tower which stands at the root of Time.)

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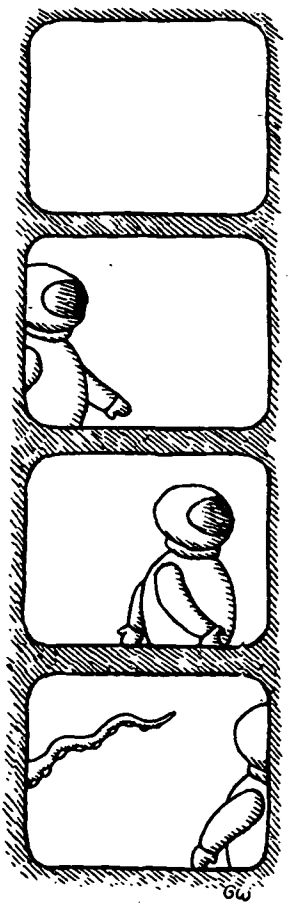
BAIRD SEARLES

Films and Television



FANTASIA

Once every couple of years or so, the vagaries of chance give us a month with absolutely nothing to review that's current. I rather welcome this since it presents me with an opportunity to write about old films that may be available for viewing.

This is such a month: as I write, the fall TV season is still quite a way off, and the spate of films "inspired" by *Star Wars* is still getting off the ground. And luckily, I was by coincidence able to see one of the best ever fantasy films in rather special circumstances.

Many of you have probably seen the 22nd *Best from F&SF* volume culled from this magazine. In it, my beloved editor let me do an article on the 10 best fantasy/s-f films of all time. Some of them (*Things To Come, THX-1138, Beauty and the Beast*) I've been able to write about in detail at one point or another, but I've never had the chance to deal at length with a favorite of favorites, *Fantasia.*

As I've mentioned before, Disney's place in the history of fantastic cinema is strangely ambiguous. A Disney fantasy was very probably the first film many of us ever saw, but because his films are animated and because they are primarily "for

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children," they have been largely ignored by the cognoscenti.

For those who have never seen *Fantasia* (can there be any such left?), it consists of animated, visual realizations of eight pieces of classical music. Essentially, if you accept the definition of dance as "movement to music," *Fantasia* is a program of dance pieces, with the entire screen picture choreographed rather than simply human bodies.

The whole point of the film, of course, is fantasy. The word "fantasia" in music means a composition of no fixed form, but Disney undoubtedly chose the term not only for its musical connotation, but to clue in the audience that it was going to see fantasies.

Disney had been working up to this kind of choreographed animation throughout the '30s. The series of short cartoons called Silly Symphonies were almost entirely animated action to music: the first, "Skeleton Dance," was a *danse macabre* for four sets of bones, who took apart and put together each other with considerable ingenuity; Disney's first Academy Award winner was the Silly Symphony, "Flowers and Trees," with a cast of personified vegetation.

Fantasia was the great experiment with culture, one of a number of 30s filmland attempts to convince the world that movies were something beyond mass entertainment that came along with popcorn and free dishes. Hard as it may be to believe now, it was a failure on its first release and incurred a severe financial loss for the Disney studio. The mass media damned it as "pretentious" and "arty," while the culture buffs looked on it as vulgar — how dare the Hollywood creator of Mickey Mouse fool around with Bach and Beethoven?

Time has proved that it is the perfect example of the cliched "ahead of its time" — and then some. Various factors have had their part in this: the drug culture in search of trip films, a more relaxed attitude toward the sacred cow of classical music, and just an advancement in public taste in the acceptance of something more complex than *Dumbo*.

Again, for that hypothetical person who has never seen it, the seven sections (the last uses two separate pieces of music, making the eight selections) in brief description:

Bach's "Toccata and Fugue in D Minor" is pure abstraction, shapes and light moving to music.

Tchaikovsky's "Nutcracker Suite" is nature *cum* elves, slim inhuman mites that spray dew from their wands, color the leaves in autumn, and freeze the streams by gliding over them. There are wonderful visual puns equating natural creatures with dancers: mushrooms

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for the Chinese dance, orchids and thistles looking like Cossack couple for the Russian, langorous fish behind their finny veils for the Arabian.

Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring" (still very avant garde at the time) is a history of life on Earth, beginning with a trip through space passing close to the sun, coming upon the small planet with the one satellite, and watching the boiling, stewing, steaming volcanic action as the crust forms; the beginning of life in the waters; and a tremendous sequence in the Age of Dinosaurs, climaxing in a battle to the death between a stegosaurus and a tyrannosaurus. This was *not* fantasy, admitted; it was as real as animation and contemporary paleontology could make it.

Dukas' "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" is the classic old story of the novice who goes too far in the use of power, and is undone, in this case by hundreds of determinedly animated brooms he has set loose. The fact that the apprentice is "played" by Mickey Mouse did not endear it to the intelligentsia of the time.

Beethoven's "Pastoral" Symphony is conceived in terms of Greek mythology; visually it is very close to the wonderful art deco pictures of Maxfield Parrish. Over the green fields of Olympus sweep centaurs, fauns, cherubs, and unicorns in decorator colors. Vulcan and Zeus bring forth a storm on the revels of Bacchus, Apollo and Iris appear in its wake, and Diana shoots stars from her bowed moon. I personally go to pieces when a stream of Pegasuses (Pegasi?) curves around a templed island and lands in the lake around it.

Ponchielli's grand old chestnut, "The Dance of the Hours," is danced by a ballet company of ostriches, elephants, hippopotami, and alligators. It is one of the supreme dance satires of all time.

Mussorgsky's "Night on Bald Mountain" was presented as the witch's sabbath to end all witch's sabbaths; its green breasted harpies (not to mention the topless female centaurs of the "Pastoral") raised eyebrows at a time when women's breasts were just *not* shown on screen. This orgy of evil fades into Schubert's "Ave Maria," a conventionally pietistic ending, still quite beautiful in its robed figures in procession through a forest of Gothic arches.

Yes, it's quite a movie. And the "rather special circumstances" in seeing it that I mentioned? I saw *Fantasia* at the Radio City Music Hall, where it started out almost 40 years ago. This resolved a long standing grudge against my mother for unreasonably refusing, when I was 5, to take me from Kentucky to New York just to see a movie.

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Ron Goulart's most recent books are Capricorn One *(a novelization of the movie),* The Wicked Cyborg *(DAW) and* Cowboy Heaven *(forthcoming, from Doubleday). His new story for F&SF is a futuristic domestic drama in which the husband and lead happens to be a computer.*

Pulling The Plug

by RON GOULART

He had a minor breakdown just as he was flipping his oversleeping wife out of her hotbed, mixing the breakfast Jooz, switching his son's television wall off the gay puppet show the kid kept trying to watch, picking out a more sedate frontless dress for his daughter, and trying taste a new frozen cottage cheese-on-a-stick product some brainless company out in the San Fernando Sector of Greater Los Angeles wanted to put on the market.

"Ugh," he complained out of his primary voice hole. "This stuff tastes like crap."

"Well, isn't it supposed to?" His wife came flapping into the living-area pit, wearing only a pair of China III soothsandals. She was an absolutely stunning green-haired woman of twenty-nine.

"No, no, not this one. The last product I tested was made out of renovated sewage, mock turkey leg thing called Turx," said Gurney Hill, commencing to worry. "There's something wrong with my major mouth hole, Bran, and my savor perceptors. When everything starts tasting like crap, that's a sure sign of some kind of trouble."

His wife pulled her eyebrows higher with her thumbs, causing her handsome breasts to jiggle, and studied him. "You look fine to me, Gurney. All bright and gleaming as a new pin."

"You know, Bran, I really don't much like to be compared to a new pin or a recent-make skycar or —"

"Gurney, Gurney love, you're too touchy. So sensitive." She flapped across the thermo floor, rested against his shining surface, stroked his central view hole. "Don't be, there's no need."

"Hey, what'd I tell you about panting on me? It gets my front all fogged."

"Who's going to notice? Only me and your two loving offspring and possibly —"

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"How about Bones Ozmond? Every time he comes around he chides me. 'Old chrone's looking mighty tacky, Gurn.' 'Think you bought a lemon, Gurn.'"

"All repair persons talk like that."

"Ozmond happens to be a PhD, for Christ sake."

Bran, long fluffy green hair fluttering, was glancing around the oval room. "Oh, all right, here," she said, snatching up a discarded wrapper from the Nertz he'd earlier sampled. "I'll wipe the moisture off your surface."

"Not with that kind of plyo, it'll leave scratches."

She, sighing, stepped back. "You never used to be so finicky about your appearance."

"I didn't used to be part of our home computer system," he replied.

Turning her lovely bare and deeply tanned back to him, Bran began sobbing. It caused her buttocks to inscribe provocative little circles in the morning air. "Oh, Gurney, we've been over this so many times. There was nothing else to —"

"Another thing I'd like. I'd like longer arms. All I can do with these things Bones fashioned is reach down to unwrap all the incredible junk which —"

"Some of it's not incredible junk, darling." She faced him, out of reach of his little metal hands. "You told me last week you liked those Grumps that —"

"Sourdough chips, phooey," said her husband. "What I meant was, not that anybody pays much attention to me anymore, I thought Grumps were awful enough to appeal to a large portion of the West America public. And I was right."

"You always are. That's why you're a key man with Testmasters."

"Man! Ha! Phooey!"

Bran resumed sobbing. "Oh, Gurney. Don't you think I miss you, miss your rough, strapping arms around my supple form?"

His view hole watched her lovely left breast slap gently against the right. "I never had rough, strapping arms," he told her. "What I had was sort of slatty arms, covered with a light fuzz. Mayhap you've got me confused with —"

"Nobody says mayhap anymore, this is 2050 after all. Nobody's said mayhap since —"

"Didn't I just inform you I was in the midst of another mechanical breakdown?"

His green-headed wife wiped at her right eye with a tanned knuckle, causing her right breast to woggle. "I'll call Ozmond right —"

"Nope, I'll call him. I know how much you enjoy chatting with him, but —"

"How can you phone?"

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"I'm learning how to accomplish a lot of new things, Bran. I can tap into the pixphone system now, little trick I learned from a 'puter. I know over in the Oxnard Redoubt."

She blinked. "You're not supposed —"

"Dad, I'd like to have a word with you. Excuse me, Mom-2." Calvin, his lanky twelve-year-old son, had come marching into the room. "Now, you often tell me that, even though you've been transmogrified, there's no reason why we can't sustain our old relationship and the easy comradeship we —"

"I'll dress." Bran left them.

"Well, you have a problem, Cal?"

"Ever since you became a computer, Dad, you'll forgive my saying, you've been very puritanical. Fact is, you —"

"I didn't *become* a computer," Gurney corrected. "My *brain* was transplanted into our home computer system because your mother, in her infinite wisdom, decided —"

"Actually, Dad, that's a problem you and Mom-2 have to resolve," said Calvin, reaching inside his latex sweatunic to scratch at his ribs. "Although, if you want my opinion, she did the right thing. There you were covered by ten tons of Pacific Palisades mud with only the top of your head and your nose and part of your —"

"I don't want to dwell on the accident anymore. That was seven months ago. I have to forget the past, when I had a body and fuzzy, slatty arms and my own private parts and —"

"Could we maybe talk about my viewing problems first, Dad?" asked Calvin. "You cut off *Ed the Elf* on me this morning, and I'm moved to mention I'm quipping mad about it, about the —"

"You're starting to sound like Bones Ozmond. He always says quipping and blapping and —"

"Bones is au courant, same as me, when it comes to vernacular. The point, though, is that now you're part of our computer system and can control what flows out of the entertainment units, you've been too tough in censoring my end of things. For example, last evening you edited several crucial scenes from *The Gypsy Disembowler* show, and the day before while I was watching *The Blue Goon* you —"

"Tasteless shows, both," his father assured him. "A gypsy android who wanders around Europe searching for his long lost manufacturer. Hogwash and wiffle bink bink...."

Calvin dived toward the chromed wall which now held his father's brain. "Dad, are you okay?"

The floor swayed and hopped, the tri-op Picasso on the far wall

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swung on its peg, and the robot parakeet woke up and began whistling backwards.

"Damn quake," muttered Gurney. "Every time we have a quake it fritzes up my vocab chip and my transcuser."

"Bones says you're a lemon, Dad. This particular model of the Noofu HomCom Sis is known throughout the free world as less than —"

"Ugh-ugh."

"Dad, now what?"

After making a whooshing noise, Gurney said, "Hunk of Turx backed up into my craw circuit. Damn quake."

Calvin briefly touched the surface of his father. "Dad, I still...."

"What?"

"Oh, I was going to say I still love you, but then it seemed a sentimental sort of thing to say."

"Don't ever feel you have to apologize for your feelings. After all, Cal, it's our feelings which set off from machines and lower ... hold it a sec. Damn."

"More trouble?"

"Your sister, Mira, is trying to use the pornwall in my old den."

"Yep, she'd become a real frapping fan of that new pornshow, *Three Ball Reilly, the Horny Mutant.*"

"I don't know, Cal, trying to keep the family together, holding on to my same job, my brain a part of a Noofu and my wife having ... well, never mind."

Calvin backed toward an archway. "Dad?"

"Something else?"

"Oh ... not really. I'm going to be late for my Learning Situations skybus if I don't shake a quipping leg. Bye."

"Bye." Gurney used one of his little metal arms to pick up a new product sample from the floating stand nearby. "This one's called Baccy, huh? Tobacco protein in gumdrop form. What does my intuition tell me about this one?"

Another small earthquake hit his Malibu Redoubt home and caused him to drop the package and start babbling in Japanese.

"Oh, I know what she wants," Gurney confided. "She'd like to pull my plug. They all would."

Dr. Nils Trocadero, his closest friend and business associate, was sitting casually in a lucite rumphug chair facing him. "Nonsense, Gurney." From a flap pocket in his syntex smock he fished out a pipe and kelp pouch. "Mind if I smoke?"

"Go ahead."

"Used to bother you."

"When I had a nose."

Trocadero tapped a spoonful of kelp into the bowl of the pipe and it ignited itself. "Let's go over the latest batch of stuff for Testmasters," he suggested in his deep vibrant

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voice. "Then we can have our personal chat."

"If she pulled the plug, of course, and turned me off for good, she wouldn't have any excuse to see Bones. Not that she'd need one then."

"Bones?" Trocadero's handsome eyebrows rose. "Surely, Gurney, you don't think Bran is in any way involved with —"

"They forget I've got view holes in other rooms. I've seen the way he pats her extremities."

"Extremities would be hands and feet. Is that what you —"

"I'm still having trouble with my vocab, in spite of another visit by Bones this morning. And he says I need a complete tune-up again. You realize what that costs. $42,000, plus parts."

"Testmasters pays for it all, Gurney. So if Bones really thinks —"

"I had a tune-up not more than three weeks back. The fifth one I've undergone since ... since you ... since this happened."

"You find it difficult to talk about the fact that I'm the one who performed the actual operation." Trocadero looked down at the see-through floor and the Pacific surf below.

"No, now, Nils, I don't exactly *blame* you for the fact I'm merely part of a second-rate Noofu."

"It was an emergency situation. You never saw yourself after that mud plopped on top of you. Not only mud hit you, you know, there were several swimming pools as well. One of them belonging to Sodomy Sid, the wealthiest Hot-Rock DJ in —"

"I know what fell on me. I know my body was allegedly beyond repair."

"Nothing alleged about it. You were flatter than a soytart. But by some miracle your skull wasn't crushed, and that splendid, very special brain of yours was virtually undamaged."

"Fortunately for Testmasters, sure," said Gurney from his voice hole. "You and I know, even though most of the stockholders don't, that the source of all the highly reliable marketing advice we sell our clients is my hunches. Not all the fantastically expensive data machines we put out for show."

"People expect gadgets, want to see lots of hardware. They bring a food product to us, and they expect we'll test it with the most modern up-to-date equipment," said his friend. "We obviously can't tell them we depend almost entirely on a vice-president whose hunches have proved to be more accurate than anything our computers and field robots can come up with."

"They might like me now, now I'm a machine myself."

After taking a slow puff on his

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pipe, Trocadero stood. "There really wasn't much time, every damn skybulance was tied up hauling off Sodomy Sid and all the guests from his Come As Your Favorite Sadist Party. If I hadn't been visiting when all that mud hit you out in the patio, well...."

"I know, Nils, I shouldn't complain. Except, well, Bran doesn't much care for me any more. Can't actually blame her. I was never exactly handsome, but I had a kind of lean, slatty grace. Not to mention a damn effective quirky smile."

"Yes, everybody still talks about your smile, fondly." Trocadero circled the chair, teeth clacking on his pipe stem. "You see, Gurney, as I've told you many times, it was a piece of good fortune that I remembered the brain unit in your particular model of Noofu was about the right size to accommodate a human brain. As you well know, neurosurgery was my special field before I joined you at Testmasters. It was equally lucky that I recalled reading a piece in *Japanese Doctor & Ski Bum* last year wherein a Dr. Shuukwaku of the Kyoto Hospital described performing a similar operation. After a serious skytram crash outside of Kyoto he was able to transplant the brains of an entire basketball team into the home computers of some nearby synrice processors. Dr. Shuukwaku also had some helpful hints on how to nourish the human brain once it becomes a part of the computer sys —"

"Yeah, I know all about that. I was talking to Akiru only the other —"

"Akiru?"

"He's the center from the basketball team, now running the home computer system of a Mr. and Mrs. Kanashii."

"How can you talk to him?"

"Not very difficult," said Gurney. "See, I don't need much sleep anymore. Night times I devote to exploring and testing my possibilities and potentials. I can link up with all sorts of other computers, and most of the satellites. It's a real educ —"

"You're not supposed to be able to do that."

"I'm no longer your standard Noofu. I've modified myself, Nils. Initially I did it to while away the time. Recently, though, I've had other motives. Probably you don't want to hear further about my suspicions."

"Suspicions?"

"About Bran and Bones Ozmond."

"Oh, those suspicions, yes." Trocadero chuckled. "They're unfounded, Gurney, I assure you. Now, what say we get to work? First proposed product on today's list is Boopzas, which the manufacturers inform me are bosom-shaped

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pizzas. How did you like them and what do you think the product's chances are."

Gurney told him.

"Squinch yourself!" suggested Bones Ozmond. Stepping back from Gurney's front surface, he dropped his electroplunger into his seethrough plaz satchel.

"I know how it must gall you to have to patch me up. But you've got to put Testmasters ahead of your own lusts."

"You're out of your quilting mind, Gurn." Ozmond was a large and extremely handsome young man with wavy orange hair. He grinned, his sky-blue teeth flashing. "Not that it's unexpected, since your blapping brain's been jammed into this pile of junk all these months. Boy, did you get a lemon."

"I'd much rather be in a robot body, a humanoid form," said Gurney. "That's out of the question, however, as you're well aware."

"Yeah, sure, Nils told me. They can't risk moving your brain again or there might be permanent damage." Bones laughed, letting his satchel smack against his massive thigh. "Ask me, your brain's already huffed up, Gurn."

"Don't think I don't realize what you'd really like to do," he said. "You'd like to pull my plug, turn me off for good. Then you and ... well, never mind."

"Even if I pulled your plug, Gurn, you got emergency generators that'd take over. I helped install the quiffing things, remember?"

"I speak metaphorically when I use the phrase about pulling the plug, Bones. You and Bran ought to —"

"Don't be a stippling idiot, you talk like a man with bupp for brains." Tan face wrinkling, Bones shook a big fist at the wall which held Gurney's brain. "I don't go in for squiffing women as old as Bran. I like 'em in the 18-to-22 range, and even if I did go in for older squiff, I wouldn't mess with a lady who's got an iron-clad marriage contract such as the one you stuck Bran with."

"You know all about that, huh?"

Bran's mentioned it, sure," admitted the repair expert. "Holy bupp, she sure must have been in love with you then, signing a 20-year marriage contract. One without a single escape clause. Even with your noodle sauce plumped into a home computer, and a second-rate Jap one at that, poor lady's legally bound to stay domiciled with you."

"One more reason you'd like to pull my plug," said Gurney. "Metaphorically."

"Tell Nils you still need a valve

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job and a new polarity guard. I got to —"

"Hurrying off to the Electric Guru, are you?"

Scowling, Bones inquired, "How'd you know I go there?"

"I have a wide-ranging mind," replied Gurney. "Being part of a computer now, I've taught myself to contact all sorts of fellow instruments. The jukebar at the Guru is a special chum of mine. Every time you show there, I know, as well as whom you're with. So far, you've been careful not to —"

"Daddy, this is highly annoying!" His slim blue-haired daughter burst into the living-area pit, wearing a relatively sedate frontless frock. "I come home from Formless Educative Experience, plump down in my steambed to watch *Nancy Nympho, Horny Girl Detective,* and it's not on. Amend that, it is on but all sorts of interesting portions of Nancy and her fun-loving pals have flickering black marks over them."

"Right," said her father out of his voice hole. "It's a new knack I found I have, for selective editing. I can black out offensive portions of actors in films, vidisc, TVcaz or brain stim pool.

"Daddy, this puritanical streak of yours is really getting to be painful." Mira turned to Bones. "Can't you adjust him so he's not quite such a prude?"

"Can't do anything to him he doesn't want done," said Bones, grinning.

"When I'm at Formless I feel truly left out because my classmates can describe the most intimate sections of Nancy and —"

"Family squabble." Bones trotted to an exitway. "None of my huffing business."

Looking after him, Mira said, "I imagine he's got a quiffer the size of a —"

"See! That's why I try to clean up your viewing fare. A girl of your social status shouldn't speculate about the private parts of a handyman."

"Bones is a vice-president of Testmasters, isn't he, as well as being in charge of keeping you shipshape? Actually then he's my equal, and you heard him declare he prefers girls in my age range."

"That was subterfuge, and you're only sixteen."

"I doubt he'd quibble over a couple years. And what do you mean subterfuge? Surely you don't still think Mommy and Bones are —"

"Enough, go back to your own area," ordered Gurney. "If you promise not to hound me, I'll let a couple shots of Nancy go through unaltered."

"Thanks, Daddy." She hesitated beside the sample table. "What have you been testing today?" She

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lifted up an amber plaz pouch. "Stoo? Sounds interesting, what's it made of?"

"Renovated sewage."

"Same as everything. Where's the gimmick?"

"With this one you can eat the pouch, too."

"Tasty?"

"Tasty, but not quite crunchy enough. Besides, my instincts tell me the pouch is the wrong color."

"Amber is cute."

"Not for stew."

"What's this other one? Chocoline. Do you eat it or —"

"It's a chest rub, a chocolate-flavored chest rub. My hunch is it'll go very big in California North. Though carob might do even better."

"Say, I think the other day Nancy rubbed something like this on Ned's —"

"Put it down, Mira, and go view. I've still got some work to do."

His daughter darted forward, patted his smooth surface, gently, and scurried away.

For a while after he found out what was really going on, Gurney didn't know whom to confide in. Finally he decided on Dr. Shuukwaku. One of his brain friends in Japan arranged an introduction.

Without telling anyone, Gurney had continued to make adjustments and amendments to himself. He'd greatly increased the number of people and mechanisms he could contact, added substantially to the kinds of information he could gather and store inside himself.

"I stumbled on this thing by accident," he told Dr. Shuukwaku.

Because of another new modification he could see right into the doctor's tiny office in the heart of Kyoto. Shuukwaku was nearly seven feet tall and had to hunch to fit into his surroundings. "You are, Mr. Hill, certain of your facts?"

"Of course I'm certain. Listen, no matter what Bones says, I'm in tiptop condition. Even with all these quakes we've been having lately. See, Doctor, I had the notion originally that my wife ... did I show you her picture?"

"Yes, in perfect holograph projection. Allow me, by the way, to compliment you on having a lovely wife as well as the ability to transmit such extremely clear and well-defined pictures. Even Pana-Sony can't equal the —"

"It doesn't do me any good to have a lovely wife anymore," Gurney said. "You're the leading authority on this field, Doctor. So you know it's a lonely and passionless way of life, being a computer."

"Here in my native land we have a saying, Mr. Hill. If the butterfly could —"

"Yeah, but listen. I'm coming

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to how I discovered Bran's been quiffing Nils and not Bones all this time. See, by modifying my —"

"Excuse me, what is the exact meaning of quiffing? Am I correct in assuming it is the same as what we mean by hoopie-hoopie?"

"You're not as au courant as I'd expected, Doctor. What I want to convey to you is that all these months, ever since I turned into this Noofu, I was certain my wife was being unfaithful with Bones Ozmond."

"Ah, but you learn she hasn't been unfaithful at all."

"No, I learn she's being huffed by Nils Trocadero. My best friend, my long-time business partner and the very guy who stuck my brain where it is. All along, when Bran's been taking off and pretending to be attending Parent Commandos meetings and Bundles for Brazil sessions and all the rest, I assumed it was Bones she was meeting on the sly. You know, because of the way they act around here," Gurney explained to the distant practitioner. "On the contrary, it's been Nils. Actually he's the one who'd like to pull my plug, except he can't because I'm the hub of the whole damn company."

"How exactly, Mr. Hill, did you ascertain the true nature of the situation?"

"Well, I was trying to locate Bones yesterday, and I just happened to take a routine look into the Santa Monica Stronghold Skytel. Did I mention I'm able to tap into the private security systems of all the better hotels and inns in Greater Los Angeles? Sure, no trick, once you know what you're about. Well, there was Bran frolicking in a shockbed with Nils. His halfwit pipe was smoldering on an end table, and Bran was hooting with sensual glee. My wife and my best friend."

"These are rather old-fashioned passions which trouble you," the doctor pointed out. "We live in the mid-21st Century, and the concept of marriage has been much modified in the past few decades so —"

"Not my concept, nope. Marriage is marriage. I fouled up with my first one, but this time around I've got a foolproof contract."

"An admirable contract, I don't doubt," said Shuukwaku. "I would suggest, however, you allow your strikingly lovely wife to —"

"Nothing, I allow nothing. I'll fix things, remedy this situation, set things right."

"How exactly?"

"I've developed myself to the point where I can intrude all over the place," said Gurney. "Anywhere Bran and Nils go, I can watch. I'm going to start harassing them until he gives up and she realizes her place is by my side. For instance, next time they go to the

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Skytel, I'll turn on the —"

"Mr. Hill, no matter what you do, you will remain a —"

Bap!

Gurney cut off communications with Dr. Shuukwaku.

"A lot he knows," he told the empty house.

The big quake interrupted his confrontation with Nils Trocadero.

Trocadero, waving a phallic-shaped popsicle, said, "I ought to be getting your opinions on these Dickies that General Foods wants to introduce. Instead, damn it, I've come to ask you to stop heckling Bran and myself. We, neither of us, weren't amused at the Skytel when you turned on —"

"Ha!" laughed Gurney out of his voice hole. "So you finally admit you and my —"

"Yes, obviously. You can't expect a woman overflowing with life's vital juices to get all her gratifications from a piece of hardware."

"You're the one who saw to it I was converted into hardware."

"It wasn't deliberate," his partner insisted. "At the time, my only concern was to keep your brain alive. Now, though, I —"

"Sure, you want to pull my plug," said Gurney. "Still you won't, because as much as I annoy you while you dally with my wife, you still need my brain and its over 90% accurate hunches about marketing-poss —"

Blam!

The entire room shook, the entire house shook, the entire Malibu Redoubt shook. It was an enormous quake, strong enough to cause Gurney to black out completely.

"... much better this way," someone was saying.

His nose hole smelled burning kelp, leading him to conclude it was Trocadero who was droning on.

"From the time you started pestering Bran and me, I've been making notes on how to modify you, checking out my theories with Bones," Trocadero was explaining from the lucite rumphug chair. "The problem was your increasing omniscience. If you could watch us in the intimacy of the Skytel, you weren't likely to let me sneak up on you here in your own wall." He chuckled. "The quake was a godsend, since it knocked you out long enough to allow me to make certain changes."

"I get it," said Gurney, regaining control of his speech facilities. "You're going to pull my plug."

"Not at all, because then Testmasters would suffer, as you've often pointed out," said Trocadero. "What we don't want, though, is your mind roaming hither and yon, snooping and prying, intruding into the life Bran and I'd like to have, dictating to your family, and

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in general making a nuisance of yourself." He rose from his chair. "While you were unconscious, therefore, I altered you. From now on, you'll find you have very little free will; you'll only be able to test the products I bring you and comment on them. To be absolutely safe, I've also fixed things so that when you're not in use you can be turned off."

"What did you —"

"We don't have to pull your plug," Trocadero said, moving toward Gurney's smooth chrome surface. "All we had to do was add a switch."

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Michael Bishop has contributed nine stories to F&SF over the past seven years, including "Cathadonian Odyssey," "The Samurai and the Willows," and "Leaps of Faith," a remarkably steady and high quality production. His best-known novel is A Little Knowledge.

Effigies

by MICHAEL BISHOP

Barefooted, trailing her spear, Theleh crosses the gorge bottom. A rag at the point of her spear, blue and tatter-tipped, whips about in the wind like a sliced iguabi tongue. There are fewer iguabi on Hond than there used to be, and Theleh drags her spear because she has no real expectation of a sighting. Neither does she wish to take herself terribly far from the cliffs, where, at least, water and food are available, and she may benefit from the comforting presence — if not the company — of her few remaining fellows.

Then, a hundred strides from her across the crazed red surface of the gorge, Theleh sees a vigorously growing effigy of Verlis. Stunned, she halts and shields her eyes.

Verlis the Maker has been dead nine turnings of Hond, three sheddings. A long time, it seems. His effigy makes a rustling sound and waves about dryly in the wind, a stalk of stubborn vegetation where vegetation ought not to be. Theleh drops her hand. She resumes walking, a hundred swift thoughtful strides. Then she stops in front of this crippled parody of her mentor and stares at its familiar mummy face. In the lovelorn desert wind the face nods at her blankly, wholly unaware of the cruelty of its imperfection. What do Verlis's quirkish efforts to save them mean to this memento of his failure?

Theleh refrains from moving. Almost hypnotized, she casts back to the Maker's lifetime. She allows the sun, like a bludgeon of air, to beat down upon her in rhythm with her pulsebeats....

The glistening structures on the Adiro Cliffs were labyrinths set inside the wind-eroded rock formations surmounting the escarpment; they were set in the rock in the same way that a lustrous cloth is

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sometimes used to line a coarser one. Where the formations broke apart, a polychrome tower might emerge or a fragile-seeming, spun-metal bridge jump the chasm between rock spire and rock spire. A bequeathment.

When Verlis was alive, most of Theleh's people lived beside the labyrinth - riddle formations in brushwood lean-tos or stone hovels of no more architectural genius than a rubble heap. Ever contrary, Verlis himself lived *inside* the polychrome structures bequeathed the Dying People by ancestors long dead. Outside the labyrinths, against the strictures of custom, he cloaked himself in an old shedding and strode about the others' lean-to and rock encampments with a purpose all his own. He was the only one of their number who knew how to navigate the sheath inside the rocks without a firebrand fisted above his head, and they saw to it that he now and again had meat only because of his great age and their unsuppressible awe of him. Evmauna, chief among the people's hunters, had told everyone that Verlis knew the secrets of the power sources inside the labyrinths, that he had access to all the light that anyone might require....

But Theleh wasn't at this time worried about the old man. She paid him little heed. Her immediate concerns were the girl Atmega and the hook-footed boy called Hrul with whom she had been grouped for hunting expeditions and procreative affection. Evmauna, playing no favorites, had made the groupings, and it was unfortunate that Theleh had only contempt for Hrul — who was cynical to the point of nihilism and so insensitive as to be an unmeaning buffoon even in the most "redemptive" of all acts. When he lay with either Atmega or Theleh, as he must by decree on alternate risings of the sun, he sang aloud his doubts and lamentations as they coupled. Then, standing, he would turn his head to spit a glitter of saliva upon the ground.

"If by sun-high that has become a diamond," Hrul would say, "then surely you will bear our child."

Atmega gave Theleh further cause for despair because she thought the boy's ritual crudities amusing, if not always funny enough for strong laughter. The only ways that Theleh could express her disapproval, then, were by forcibly covering Hrul's mouth during the act, feigning a passion she did not feel, and then afterwards seeking to convince Atmega of the boy's monstrousness. If the Dying People died in spirit before they died in fact, she argued, their dying would be all the more meaningless; they would rot into Hond like the fibrous guts of broken sanli gourds,

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whose decay is of no more use to the soil than are the cries of migrating night birds. In this way Theleh sought to win over her friend, her spouse and her sister.

"You must laugh at Hrul," Atmega would say, "or his mockings *will* come to have meaning. They will kill *your* spirit, Theleh."

"Yes, and I hate him for the murder he moves toward."

"Don't," Atmega advised. "You wrong him. As for me, I love Hrul for the idiocy of his despair. Nothing he turns his hand to has ever succeeded, and all he has ever wanted is to leave some testament to the Night."

"For this you love him?"

Atmega laughed. "I speak to the ideal." An emendation that gave the girls cause to join arms and laugh together — but it didn't truly console, this brief sharing. It was a short-lived respite, and nothing more.

Later Theleh reflected that whatever Hrul left behind him as testament would have to be as twisted as himself. The Night would cover it without favor or discrimination, and the stars encircling Hond would throb like unhealed wounds, pinpricks of bleeding mercury. Why, then, even on Evmauna's order, should one seek to be the vessel of Hrul's impotent seed?

He doesn't believe, Theleh told herself. Therefore, why should I? Why should any of us?

Not long after she had made her groupings of the people at Adiro, Evmauna came before them in open assembly and announced that they would tomorrow descend into the gorge for the hunt. She spoke in firelight. She said that the iguabi had returned from their wintering and were filtering back into the gorge like ghosts. She had seen one herself that afternoon. They were nimble monsters, creatures that at noonday lengthened to many-legged needles but at nightfall flattened like fire-marbled cheeses in a skillet. They were meat, and if you could find them dancing across the gorge bottom, they were easily speared. This turning, they had wintered longer than they ordinarily did.

"But now," Evmauna told the people on the Adiro Cliffs, "they are back. I have seen one."

Verlis appeared from the shadow of the metal structure in the rocks. There was no glow behind him, no intimation of light in the tunnels he alone inhabited. Theleh caught wind of him as a dusty odor on the night, then saw his reedy form beyond the fire tongues licking skyward: an apparition at Evmauna's back, a blackness against the blackness of the cliffs. And it seemed to Theleh, even though she could not see the old man's eyes, that he was looking across the fire

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directly at her. Seeking reassurance, the girl scooted forward on her buttocks and put a hand on Atmega's ankle.

"And how long must we be gone?" the man Ebeth asked from another part of their circle.

"Until each of us has an iguabi hide to hang from his belt," Evmauna responded. Her face was already marked for the hunt, and the belt at her waist was a belt of iguabi hide.

Theleh watched Verlis emerge from the night, and she tightened her grip on her sister's ankle — for the old man's stare proved to be turned on no one but her, the stare of weak but uncompromising eyes from a cage of bone. For so old a man Verlis was remarkably erect, and when he stopped at the edge of their assembly, everyone but Evmauna had finally seen him.

"Evmauna," he said.

Startled, the woman turned.

"Who are you taking with you tomorrow?" he asked.

"Why? Do you wish to go?"

Verlis chuckled mirthlessly. "I? Not I, Evmauna. Not yet. I wish one of you to remain."

That said, he pointed a single gnarled finger at Evmauna and then swung it toward Theleh. Of all the Dying People on the Adiro Cliffs, Theleh was chosen. The girl tightened her fingers again around Atmega's ankle.

"Do you wish to amputate my foot?" Atmega whispered.

Theleh released the girl's leg, and Hrul, sitting to Atmega's right, smiled at her nastily.

"What do you want her for?" Evmauna was asking Verlis.

"For the most redemptive of acts," Hrul whispered. "And if anything comes of it, the sun will stop and the stars wink out."

"To aid me," Verlis answered Evmauna.

"To aid me," Hrul mocked the old man.

"Hush," Theleh commanded the boy, her brother, her husband.

"It could not be any worse with him than it is with this one," Atmega whispered. "I would wager that the old man doesn't sing."

"Not so well as I," Hrul said. "Like a dying iguabi."

This whispered banter was intolerable. Theleh wanted to hear what Verlis and Evmauna were saying; she wanted the eyes of Ebeth, Denlot, Pelsu, Thami, and all the others turned away from her companions and herself to the unexpected matter at hand. "Swallow your words," she told Atmega and Hrul. "If you reverence me at all, swallow your words." And she clasped her knees and put her chin atop them, Verlis regarding her all the while. She looked at a reddish star above the old man's head and felt her heart send tremulous shud-

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ders through her chest.

"I ask her aid," Verlis was saying. "As an age-right. I am more sheddings myself than she and the two you have grouped her with."

"Very well, Verlis. She remains with you."

In the morning the others descended to the gorge with their slings, spears, and knives. A hot wind blew. Theleh watched them work their way down through the rocks; on the gorge bottom they spread out in a line twenty-three abreast. Other Dying People lived to the south, two or three more "tribes" of them — but the twenty-three people in the gorge, and Verlis with her on the escarpment, were the ones who comprised her world. That Verlis had suddenly asserted his place in this world the girl found mystifying and threatening.

On the floor of the gorge the shadows of the moving hunters made a weird black picketing, and it was impossible to tell who was who.

"I have spared you Hrul's company," Verlis said.

"How did you know I didn't care for it?" Theleh refused to look at the old man; she watched the hunters' slow progress through the dawn.

"I stroll about. I eavesdrop."

"You're shameless, then."

"Not so shameless as the old people of *my* youth, Theleh. It was their custom to pretend to omniscience."

What answer could she give the old man? The impertinences of the aged were unanswerable; so, too, their witticisms. Perhaps Hrul's embraces were not to be despised if to avoid them she must keep company with Verlis.

The old man sauntered away from her, erect but still vaguely shambling. He was going toward the labyrinth in the rocks; and when she cast a glance over her shoulder at the man, the dazzle from a polychrome spire erupting from the outcropping there almost blinded her. She put up a hand and saw him gazing at her with a look of benign expectation.

"Come," he said.

"I don't wish to go in there."

"I go in, I come out. There's no harm in it, Theleh, and very little mystery."

"I ask that you not make me enter."

"I am too old to coerce you, Theleh."

To her own embarrassment she responded, "And too old to ravish me, as well."

"Yes. Were I of a meaner spirit, I would regret that. I must confess that I *do* regret it."

"I'm sorry, Verlis," Theleh said, truly contrite. "In any case,

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our coupling would be to no purpose but an empty pleasure."

"Not even to that, young woman — I am impotent." He crossed to the tunnel entrance and halted there. He was visible to the girl as a lean, greyish figure peering into a forever-departed yesterday.

Theleh followed.

"I purposely did not ask you to enter at night," Verlis told her, and he led the way through the smooth silver-black casing of the tunnel to a right-angle turning and a cold steady shimmer of light. "Do you ever at night feel the earth moving?" he asked her as they walked. "Do you ever think that Hond contains colonies of buzzing, burrowing animals just beneath your sleeping head?"

"Never. But Evmauna thinks me unimaginative."

"Ah." Was there disappointment in this sigh? Theleh couldn't tell. "Well, young woman, these sensations you have *not* experienced are evidence of the generators below us in the cliffs. Adiro will have the potential for life long after the Dying People have squandered theirs."

She said nothing. The tunnel debouched on a room containing counters, glassware, beds, apparatus of arcane design and function, double-plated doorways into further chambers or corridors, and an astringent smell unlike any Theleh had ever encountered before. Huge metal shields hung at intervals on the walls, and each one had been engraved with a series of looping symbols or pictograms that she found altogether uninterpretable.

Between these diamond-shaped shields — pinned to the wall in the same way that children had once affixed the wings of pocsit flies to scraps of bark — were Verlis's previous skins. Seven of them. Twenty-one turnings of Hond about its livid primary. The eighth skin he wore on his back like a cloak, and the ninth he still inhabited. Even though he sinned against custom in his open display of his old incarnations, in the unfamiliarity of this rock-bound room Theleh found the skins a profound comfort — a ligature to the life she knew. She waited for Verlis to speak.

"Are you frightened?" he finally asked her.

"Yes."

"Why? The strangeness?"

"The strangeness," she acknowledged.

"Does it frighten you that we are dying?"

"It saddens me."

"It's a melancholy thing, Theleh. Not even rollicking song and the besottedness that kia brings are proof against it."

But the music in the old man's words played against the melancholy of their sense, and Theleh was

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alert to the music. "Have you found something that *is* proof?" she asked him. "What am I to aid you with? Why did you keep me from hunting with the others?"

"Come here, Theleh." He had gone to the other side of the room and placed himself behind one of the four parallel counters, marbled table tops on thick transparent supports, dividing the room into work areas. The floor was of the same beautifully veined substance as the counter tops, and Theleh approached Verlis silently over its intricate veining.

When she reached the old man, he opened a transparent drawer beneath the counter and extracted several pungent-smelling plants. He thrust them within a hand's breadth of her face.

"Do you know what these are?"

"Weed-wheat stalks, I believe." Theleh took one from Verlis. Holding it, she reflected that Verlis had lived through the ill-remembered Seasons of Rain. A time when meal had been made from weed-wheat; a time when the iguabi had mated before the people's eyes and then melted like miniature rainbows into the crevices of Hond. A time, the girl told herself, that a person had had some hope —

Verlis chuckled. "I thought you too young to remember." He laid the stalks he was holding on the counter, amid some glassware of incredibly sinuous design, and opened another drawer. "But look here, too."

A yellow tray, its cover indented slightly at the forward edge. Verlis placed the tray on the counter, put a finger in the indentation, and slipped its cover off. Theleh saw four rows of black batting in the tray, but little else. Verlis was blocking her view, leaning over the counter with a pair of tiny stainless steel tweezers. With this instrument he lifted something from one of the rows of batting and held it toward Theleh as he had just done the weed-wheat stalks.

"What is it?" the girl asked.

"A seed."

Of course it was a seed. But when Theleh asked the logical question — "Is it weed-wheat, then?" — the old man placed it carefully back in its tray and showed her an unhealed scraping on the heel of his hand. The wound was sticky looking, with a fluid the color of derva sap, and the skin beneath the fluid was as cracked as the gorge bottom. The wound's ugliness stifled Theleh's sympathetic feelings, and her annoyance with Verlis for ignoring her question came to the fore.

"That must be very painful," she said dutifully.

"I do not heal so well as I used to," Verlis said. "I am a victim, it seems, of entropy." He caught the

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girl's wrist, but was careful not to let his wound touch her. "I am speaking to the point in showing you this."

Theleh stared.

"Look at the seeds in my tray."

She looked. It was difficult to see the seeds against their black background, for they were also black. Once examined, however, they proved large and ugly, hard and mutedly shiny — as if each kernel had been embossed with a rune of rock and then fired in a kiln. Was that what weed-wheat seeds looked like? Theleh couldn't remember.

"Do you know what I wish to grow with these?" Verlis asked.

The girl shook her head.

"People, Theleh. I wish to grow people."

By working with the genetic material encoded in weed-wheat seeds and using too the cell matter scraped from the heel of his hand, Verlis had sought to program the "seeds" in his tray with all the many and variable characteristics of sentient life. As soon as he had told the girl what he was attempting, Theleh knew him to be mad. She stared at the containers and brines around her, the burners and pipettes, the calibrating mechanisms and syringes, the cryptic formulae on the walls, and she wondered at the magnitude of the man's insanity. At the same time she felt an illogical hope in it. There were forty seeds in the old man's tray, each one painfully engineered through the agencies of sweat and serendipity; and if these seeds grew, the population at Adiro would very nearly be doubled. The Dying People might yet beat back the Night.

Somehow, in the old man's presence, deep within the labyrinth bequeathed him by the dead, this did not seem such an outlandish hope.

"But how can I aid you?" Theleh asked Verlis. "It seems that the greatest part of the work is done."

"We must sow."

"Never in my life have I planted anything, Verlis. But, if you show me how, I will undertake to plant every seed myself."

"No. This isn't something I can let you do alone. If the others are not involved in the midwifing of these lives, Theleh, they will utterly reject them. In their jealousy of me and the people I have conjured from the labyrinth, they will turn their hands to — to who knows what?"

"Then you wish the others to aid us in the planting?"

"I do, Theleh. And the aid I want from you is your support. This has been a lonely triple-turning. I will also entrust to you the nutrients that will see these seeds through

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germination to adulthood."

"And the seeds themselves?"

"Those, Theleh, *I* must carry."

At sunfall, Theleh and the old man left Adiro's enigmatic fortress and climbed down through knife-edged shadows to the gorge. The girl bore on her back for Verlis's "babies" a heavy packet of food and water crystals, while the invaluable seeds — all forty of them — rode in a bag of grainy reptile hide on the old man's hip. The girl used her spear as a staff and supported Verlis when the footing was most treacherous.

In the gorge itself, however, he walked with a surprising disregard for fatigue; and because the night was not cold enough to send them scurrying for warmth and shelter, Theleh found that all her thoughts were racing ahead to her reunion with the hunters, to the inevitable drama of Verlis's revelation to them of a new but bewildering hope. How would Evmauna respond to the disruption of her hunt? What of Atmega's unbounded enthusiasm and Hrul's inelegant despair?

The world was about to be changed, and Verlis had seen fit to make Theleh a party to its transfiguration. That was not all — he had had the foresight and good sense to think to include *all* the Dying People in this imminent rebirth!

Theleh's heart welled with good feeling. "Verlis," she said as they walked, "you have a canny wisdom, and in judging you harshly from afar I have erred."

"And, Theleh, you have an awesome stride. My 'canny wisdom' has not prevented me from trying to keep pace with it."

They laughed, sharing the star-flecked indigo communion of the sky — but afterwards Theleh was careful not to tempt the old man to outdistance himself.

As it was, they reached the hunters' encampment, a group of ledges and rock awnings beneath the cliffs to the gorge's east, well before the sun was out of bed. Three fires burned on the hard, cracked ground, with spits set above them, and the sound of carefree singing drifted to them on the wind as tantalizingly as the fragrance of roasting iguabi. Apparently the festivities of the successful hunt had gone on all night, and were even now continuing, and Theleh and Verlis were swept into them before they had the chance to explain the significance of their arrival.

"Come," Atmega said, gripping Theleh's arm and pulling her to the largest of the fires. "You must have some meat. You also, Verlis. Sit down with us and eat. There's more than enough."

Evmauna, whose hunt-marked

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face looked both joyful and haggard, greeted the newcomers. Hrul uttered a nitwitticism about Theleh's not wishing to forfeit even one morning's attempt at "redemption" and earned a burst of good-natured and spontaneous laughter. Theleh, however, could feel an angry heat rising through her body — not because she was embarrassed but because Hrul was so conspicuously ignorant of any but the sexual meaning of the word he was playing with.

"Your mind is as small as a pocsit ball," she blurted. "Its wings have never beaten against a liberating breeze — perhaps your mind is wingless!"

"My mind?" said Hrul, feigning amazement. "Impossible. — What has inspired this ungrateful attack?"

"Your stupid banter and your empty soul. Redemption, you say. But do you know who it is who will ultimately redeem us, Hrul? *This* man." She took Verlis's hand and lifted it to her shoulder. "Verlis the Maker."

"Despite my 'stupid banter' of a night ago," Hrul responded, his tone parodying an elder's condescension, "I must tell you, Theleh, that it has been many turnings since Verlis has been able to redeem anyone. And now you tell me that he is going to redeem us all. — Has he discovered an elixir? A secret potion? A diet unknown to the rest of us? I fear that —"

Laughter filtered through the pauses in Hrul's speech, but now it was nervous and uncertain. It halted altogether when Evmauna barked, "That's enough! You go beyond the limits, Hrul!" Then, still sitting, she asked Verlis to explain Theleh's remark about the redemption of the Dying People. Her inflection made it clear that she was not speaking in a sexual sense, and was a reproof to the boy.

"Before sunrise," Verlis said, "when there is enough light, we must go into the desert and plant the seeds I have brought. We must use our spears for plows and our very fingers for spades. We must make purposeful love to the earth in order that we may be spared oblivion."

"But we hunt before the heat of the day," objected a man called Pelsu.

"Today we must plant," Verlis told him.

"In this place?" Pelsu went on incredulously. "A day's walk from Adiro? If we plant here, we tie ourselves to the desert."

"So we do. But it seems you've had a good hunt already. The meat on hand and that procurable while we tend our crop will ease our stay in the gorge. In any case, not everyone need remain here."

"What are we growing?" Pelsu asked.

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"Our fellows. Our descendants."

Hrul made an impertinent noise in the back of his throat, and no one reprimanded him. Evmauna, however, stood up and wiped her hands down her coarse thighs, after which the grain in her skin glistened like the veined flooring in Verlis's work room. A tall woman, Evmauna captured the others' eyes with her bearing and her commanding voice.

"It's almost dawn," she said. "We'd best go planting."

When Verlis and Theleh led the others out of the shadows of the cliffs, the flat of the gorge was liver-colored with predawn light. Looking behind her, the girl saw Atmega and Hrul in the vanguard of the trailing hunters. Hrul put a finger in each broad nostril and nodded his head toward Verlis to suggest that the old man's brain was fly-ridden. Solemnly, in both exasperation and pity, Theleh shook her head No and quickly faced forward again — the boy was incorrigible, he reveled in his cynicism.

"We must break up the earth," Verlis told everyone when the hunters stood before him in a semicircle. "We must prepare the ground lovingly."

"We haven't yet slept," protested a woman called Onveb.

"Afterwards. — Use your weapons, or your hands, or pieces of rock. Chop the soil fine. Strain the lumps with your fingers." Kneeling, the old man demonstrated. He jabbed at the hard ground with a rock from the cliff face. "If you go deep enough, you'll find a niggardly moisture."

Everyone imitated Verlis. The sky grew lighter and lighter, crowding the stars out of existence.

"Now," he commanded, his voice like worn leit-cloth, "you must shape mounds as high as your forearms with the soil you've made. Help each other. We need forty of these."

The mounds were made, and the sun at last cleared the edge of one of the cliffs. The bodies of the people in the gorge had already begun to simmer inside their skins.

"Good," Verlis declared. "Now we must plant." He gathered the hunters around him again and opened the bag he had brought down from Adiro. "Each of you must take a seed and plant it. The remaining ones Theleh and I will sow ourselves, giving them gently to the desert."

Twenty-three people planted the seeds Verlis had distributed. Then they watched as the old man and the girl moved from mound to mound poking finger-long shafts in the crumbling soil and depositing the queer rune-embossed kernels with a persnickety tenderness.

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Even Hrul watched, and Theleh was conscious of him — terribly conscious of him — a grave-faced skeptic hovering about the borders of their garden like some sort of beastie with mischief on its mind. Soon the sun was high and hot, and Hrul went back to the shelter of the cliffs with the others. Theleh, when she and Verlis had finished, was glad enough to get there too. But she stood for a long time in the cliff shade looking at their landscape of new-made miniature pyramids and temples.

"A fine city," Verlis said, and he draped her shoulders with a moist piece of cloth.

During the days that they waited for their crop to spring up, the old man kept to himself. Late and early, he took solitary walks. Theleh missed his company, but she didn't begrudge him his solitude — this was a trying time for one who had spent his last several turnings as a misunderstood recluse with but a single goal. And in the mornings before dawn Verlis did supervise the sprinkling and the mixing-in of the nutrients and water crystals Theleh had carried down from Adiro. Her mentor, the girl knew, was too afraid of failure to be gone all the time.

One morning a man named Denlot — who had developed an intense loyalty to Verlis's project — stayed out among the seeded pyramids almost until midday. On the one occasion that Evmauna called to him, he smiled at her and waved off her warning. He was busy working bead capsules into the soil and reshaping the more wind-eroded mounds. He was happy in these tasks, happy in his admiration of the garden.

Then, with stunning suddenness, the flesh on Denlot's face split from pate to chin, and the man fell unconscious in the row he had been working. Evmauna saw him fall and raised a cry of alarm.

Theleh was one of the first to reach Denlot. She lifted him from the ground with the aid of Thami and Sardogra, and back in the cliff shade she helped the others remove his belt and mantle. Denlot was an old man — not so old as Verlis, but eighteen or nineteen turnings at least. His age, Theleh felt sure, was one of the reasons he was so in sympathy with Verlis's efforts to save the Dying People. Now the man looked maimed and blistered.

"It's the false death," Sardogra said. "We must take him from his skin before the false becomes real."

Evmauna appeared. With a strigil she split the skin beneath Denlot's throat and drew a line to just above the fork of his legs; then she drew lines from the insides of his thighs to his ankles. Her cuts were expert. A moment later Den-

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lot's sixth skin came away from his body almost of itself, and Thami carried it away to prepare it for the rites of resurrection. But Theleh didn't go with the bearer of the skin; she stood staring at Denlot's near corpse and at the vivid, oddly glistening hide of a new triple-turning.

"See there," Sardogra said. "If we could each of us do that forever, we would not have to toil in Verlis's garden. Denlot is new again."

"So new that he will not be able to work for days," said Evmauna sourly, her voice heavy with an anxiety as thoroughgoing as Verlis's — an anxiety grounded in the same hopeful impatience. She touched the unconscious man's forehead.

Theleh, despite these avowals of Denlot's newness, could not help noticing on his face and lower belly the shadows of old creases on the vivid, fresh skin. Ahead of him, at best, he had only two more sheddings. He would not live so long as Verlis, for life had used him harshly. Nor did the man have any children. His "newness" was a mockery.

Pensively Theleh turned and sought out the lean-to where Atmega was playing a thin, evocative melody on a wood flute.

Nine days later, when Denlot had fully recovered from his false death, Atmega swept into the camp after a night of hunting and roused everyone with her shouts of excited joy. Whooping, she ran from shelter to shelter, then back out onto the plain of the gorge itself. She made such an unseemly din that it was impossible not to get up and stumble out into the desert after her. There Theleh saw Atmega dancing nimbly about their garden, a wraithlike figure in the first weak glow of dawn.

"He has succeeded!" Atmega cried. "Verlis has redeemed us! He has done what we believed impossible!"

If she squinted and cocked her head, Theleh could see a great many lopsided ocher tips protruding from the mounds they had made. These tips wobbled in the morning breeze. Along with many others Theleh approached the garden, and walking among its rows they saw the leaf-wrapped, featureless heads of the "weed-wheat people" Verlis had made in their image. Her companions, Theleh could tell, felt the same magnificent awe that now held her speechless, and for a long time the silence on Hond was as loud and fearsome as the persistent rolling of summer thunder.

Then Theleh gripped Hrul's hand, and Hrul took Ebeth's, and Ebeth took Sardogra's, and so on and so on — until all the hunters who had not returned to Adiro were

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hallooing together like children in their first skins. Verlis had succeeded! The Dying People were not irremissibly doomed! Atmega led the others, and everyone danced. Old chants were chanted, and speculation about their embryonic siblings in the soil was on every hunter's lips. The rising sun had no power to confound their joy.

Theleh, dancing, saw Evmauna coming toward them from the shelters. The woman halted at the garden's verge with her legs spread and her arms akimbo. By her very presence Evmauna brought the others' celebration to a standstill. Her look was a troubled one.

"My thoughts at this moment are a little different from yours," she told her people. "We are a long way from harvest. Everyone understands this, but no one wishes to confront the fact."

"This is a *hopeful* moment!" Atmega cried. "Don't ruin it for us!"

"Theleh," Evmauna said, ignoring the other girl, "find Verlis and bring him here. He may wish to see what he has wrought."

Theleh departed and found Verlis sleeping amid a jumble of broken rock halfway up the cliff and told him what had happened and brought him back down to the hunters' encampment and the garden beside it. He admired the leaf tips from the shade of the cliff and said nothing. That evening, however, he took Theleh among the rows with him and squatted in front of one of the rounded spikes nodding above the soil. He probed its sheath with his thumbs.

"Our brother," he whispered, canting his face up to Theleh's. "And I think that he will live. Yes."

Verlis's garden grew. In twelve more risings and fallings of the sun his forty earth-bound protéges had lifted their heads to the height of Theleh's shoulders. They split beneath their middles into matching leg stalks and began to shed the dull ocher sheaths protecting their faces.

"Their first false death has come early," Evmauna said. "Their first shedding is only thirteen days."

"They will have several more," Verlis replied.

But in another two days it became clear that the "people" he had made all resembled — in a grotesque and deformed way — a younger version of himself. Indeed, Theleh could go into the field and feel herself to be surrounded by callow, crippled Verlises. This feeling bred a quiet discontent and sense of betrayal in the girl — but others who experienced it, particularly Hrul and the woman called Onveb, could not keep their unhappiness or their suspicions to themselves.

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They thought Verlis a monster of deception and self-love, and they publicly said so. Since the old man continued to absent himself from the encampment except in the mornings, they could speak against him without having to face him. Not only did Hrul and Onveb indict Verlis for his great and overweening vanity, they charged that his "genius" was nothing more than senile self-indulgence. All one need do to confirm this judgment was stroll through the nodding miscreations in his garden.

Theleh was torn. She did not know whose side to be on — or if, in fact, she must commit herself to a side at all.

"I can no longer look at the real Verlis," Hrul said one evening as the hunters ate, "without seeing in his face an image of one of his malformed effigies. Let's plow his forty 'babies' under and return to Adiro."

"I urge the same," Onveb added. "Verlis has committed sacrilege."

"In what way?" Evmauna asked. "By seeking to redeem us?"

"By seeking to deify himself through this stupid replication. We are barren. His energies would have been better spent attempting to rescue us from our barrenness."

Theleh secretly felt that the old man's detractors, Hrul chief among them, were jealous and short-sighted — but the hideous evidence of Verlis's crop made it impossible for her to speak her opinion. Each day the eerie weed-wheat people declined from a crooked hardiness into unmistakable disease. Their limbs were half-formed and mismatched, their unblinking eyes stared out on the gorge from behind a rheumy film reminiscent of the fluid in the old man's wound. Verlis, the girl thought, your project has gone wrong, all wrong.

"Tomorrow night," Evmauna said, "we will speak to the genius himself. Theleh, will you see to it that he comes to our assembly?"

Her throat too tight for words, Theleh nodded.

On the following evening Denlot was the first to speak. Surprisingly, he argued against Verlis. Still uncomfortable in his new skin, he told the old man, "I championed you once — but now we must admit that our labor has gone for nothing, that this attempt at redemption is a botch."

Sitting with her chin on her knees, Theleh gave only part of her mind to Denlot's argument. Hrul was beside her to her right, and Verlis sat across the fire from her beside Evmauna. But because Atmega was altogether missing from the circle, Theleh could not help turning her head toward the darkened emptiness of the gorge for

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some indication of her sister's return. Why had she chosen this night of all nights to be away from their encampment?

"We might as well admit it," Denlot was saying. "Those 'people' out there" — he gestured at the night — "will never pull up their legs and walk as we do. And if they did, their heads are utterly empty — they know nothing. Can we expect them to mate as real people do, or must we prepare to see them seed one another through the aid of pocsit flies? And what will they produce, Verlis? Only more monsters, I'm afraid."

Verlis sighed disgustedly and spat at the fire.

"Like Hrul and Onveb," Denlot concluded, "I ask that our crop be plowed under."

"Of course you do," Verlis replied. "You are as short-sighted as they."

"It seems to me," Evmauna interjected, "that to reach his conclusion Denlot has taken the long view."

"Think again. To plow under what all of us about this fire have so devotedly tended would be both suicide and murder, Evmauna. Suicide and murder!"

Theleh looked at her mentor. Debate had halted against the terrible dead end of his last two words, and no one could find the necessary resolve to speak again.

Could it be murder, Theleh asked herself, to cover the weed-wheat people with the earth from which they had sprung? And if Verlis's offspring were so interred, would the Dying People really be committing suicide? The girl could not find it in herself to answer these questions Yes. She began to believe that Verlis, a good and well-meaning man, was now the victim of his own delusions. Even though all the most telling signs pointed to his work's futility and failure, he sought to save it only out of pride. Was he even aware of his motives in resisting the others' arguments?

When Verlis broke a stick against the ground and declared, "No one plows under our crop," Theleh was filled with a heart-breaking pity. She turned her face toward the darkness.

And saw Atmega striding out of it into the circle of light at the camp's center. "I have news that bears on this," she announced. "And for that reason I must cast my lot with Denlot and Hrul."

"What news?" Evmauna asked her.

"Even though it isn't time for them to leave, the iguabi have deserted the gorge. It's impossible to find one, impossible even to stumble upon their spoor."

"How do you know? We haven't hunted since Verlis's arrival."

"I have. I have hunted every

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night. And I have speared not a single iguabi. They're gone, Evmauna. They've been driven out, I believe, by the presence of Verlis's weed-wheat people. And since this crop is not the sort to yield meal for our bread, I ask that it be destroyed before the Dying People find their true deaths in starvation rather than sterility."

A pretty speech. Theleh realized now that Atmega had rehearsed it before stepping out of the darkness — but its premeditation in no way invalidated the girl's argument, and Theleh both feared and hoped that it would end their debate. Surely the old man would give in now. The iguabi were too precious to frighten from the gorge, too precious to risk on an uncertainty like his Hond-grown people....

"No one," Verlis the Maker told the hunters quietly, intractably, "no one plows under our fellows and heirs." That spoken, he rose and left the encampment.

No one plowed them under. But despite the stewardship of Theleh and one or two others, the weed-wheat people went figuratively and literally to seed. Their fibrous bodies cracked, and hairlike scarlet silks grew from their chests and fell beneath their shoulders weighted by seeds exactly like the ones Verlis had created in the fortress at Adiro. When the wind blew with especial fierceness, these seeds detached themselves and tumbled away as if propelled from within by tiny demons. And the iguabi, which had become harder and harder to find, even when the hunters scoured the far ends of the gorge, seemed now to have abandoned the planet altogether.

Hunger crept upon the ten or twelve people tending the old man's shabby garden; and, forty times over, the mummies growing there ridiculed the hunters with their distorted visages of Verlis. Theleh knew that those who had returned to Adiro were also beginning to feel the pinch of famine, and she did her daily work with a numb diligence.

One morning she awoke to find Atmega leaning over her in the grainy light. Hrul was absent from her side.

"Come, Theleh. Out to the fields with us."

Theleh bolted up from her slab. The hunters, she reflected groggily, were about to destroy the old man's garden. They wanted her participation, and she was not at all averse. Her stomach, after all, felt like a rock with ice expanding destructively in its secret seams.

"What about Verlis? Where is he?"

"He drowses on," Atmega told her. "Come silently. Most of the others have already gathered."

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They stalked past the rock awning beneath which Verlis had elected to spend the night and joined their comrades among the weed-wheat people. Hrul — hook-footed Hrul — grinned at Theleh as if to say, I knew you'd see things our way; and she realized that in a moment they would all be at their little atrocity together, throttling the old man's plants with their bare hands, gutting them with knives, and stripping them down to their meaty innards for both themselves and the people at Adiro. Her heart pounded like the midday sun in dread and anticipation.

In their desire to finish before the old man awoke, the hunters murdered Verlis again and again. As they uprooted their victims, the weed-wheat people's eyes clouded and closed — but none cried out, or otherwise protested, and it was hard for Theleh to view their stealthy harvest as a massacre. How, finally, were the Dying People related to these deformed reflections of the oldest man among them? In no way at all, it seemed.

"Eat," Hrul urged Theleh from a row away. "Eat, girl. We've earned the right with our work and with our overlong tolerance of Verlis's madness." He folded back the dry leaves enveloping an organ very like a heart and bit into it with no apparent qualms.

Others about Theleh were doing the same — Denlot, Thami, Sardogra, Onveb, Atmega, and even Evmauna, who had strangled weed-wheat people with an astonishing skill and rapacity. Eagerly, then, Theleh tore a desiccated organ-fruit from one of the uprooted corpses and sank her teeth into it. A flavor as of ashes and dry soil filled her mouth, but she ate in spite of the taste. So did everyone else. Who am I, one of the youngest here, to demur? the girl asked herself; and before the sun had fully risen, they had devoured an eighth part of their crop.

At last Hrul stood up and said, "We'll never be able to survive on such a diet. The taste is far too brackish and earthy."

"No," said Verlis the Maker, and the hunters swung about to see the old man gazing down upon them from a rock beside the garden. "You'll not be satisfied, Hrul, until you've actually begun eating one another."

Theleh saw Verlis's face as a wrathful black disk, toward which she must lift her hands imploringly.

But Verlis turned aside from her, climbed lamely down from his rock, and began walking in the general direction of Adiro. It would be full sun in a little while, and he risked death if he continued homeward through the middle of the gorge. Theleh dropped her hands and ran after him.

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"Verlis, take shelter. You'll kill yourself this way."

His previous shedding, which he wore as a cloak, rippled and snapped in the wind. He caught it at his throat. He looked at Theleh out of a pair of familiar, Hond-weary eyes.

"Verlis, forgive me."

"For what, your hunger?" He halted and touched her face. "I have work to do, Theleh. Let me go back to it."

"But the heat—"

"How many skins have I worn?" He waved a hand, dismissing her concern. "Go back to your hook-footed infant."

She watched him proceed up the gorge. After a time he angled off to the left and disappeared among the shadows of various outcroppings below the cliff face. Verlis would reach home safely, Theleh knew, and she returned to the people with whom she had murdered his children. The ashy taste in her mouth was an accusation she could neither ignore nor rationalize.

The following day Evmauna led the others back to the Adiro Cliffs. Their return marked the beginning of a severe quarter-turning. The Dying People had a difficult time finding vegetation fit to eat and edible varieties of game to replace the cunningly fled iguabi.

Occasionally they would see from their vantage high above the gorge a stunted weed-wheat person thrusting up through the feverish soil, and Hrul, despite his crippled foot, took great pains to proceed to these places and uproot the random stalks. They had to be destroyed, of course, so that the iguabi might the sooner return — but it seemed to Theleh that Hrul cut them down with a cruel viciousness and delight. He had not forgotten that Verlis's sole word of reprimand to the hunters had been addressed directly to him. In this season of near famine, then, the boy's cynicism had taken on a repulsively sullen and vindictive cast. Theleh, despite Evmauna's decree, refused to lie with him.

"It's a sin to refuse redemption with him," Atmega told her.

"Did you take your turn with him this morning?"

"Of course."

Theleh spat. "If by sun-high that has become a diamond, you will live to bear his child."

Atmega bridled visibly, then softened her look to one of dim puzzlement. "You are more like Hrul than you know," she said. From across the plateau Onveb beckoned, and, after lifting a hand to touch Theleh's shoulder, Atmega hurried off to join the woman in her foraging.

This was a time when the Dying People dug sanli gourds out of the ground, crisped the husks of insects

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for flour, and set traps for the small winged reptiles that sometimes nested among the steepest of Adiro's cliffs. There was dried iguabi from past quarter-turnings, but not much, and no one really wanted to begin plundering it. It was a hope held in reserve.

Verlis kept to himself. No one took him food, and no one saw him forage. Hrul began to argue that the tunnels and towers in which the old man spent his time must contain a remarkable quantity of foodstuffs. How else could he survive? And, Hrul went on, if Verlis did have such supplies on hand, he ought by rights to share them.

"Unless his mind has so completely failed him that he has begun to eat his old sheddings."

"His mind is occupied with something besides our hunger," Theleh said.

"And what is that?"

"Our survival."

"Very good, Theleh. How quick you are. Will you answer me one question, then?"

"What is it?"

"Just this: If we starve to death, has Verlis secured our survival?"

"Our hunger isn't yet that great."

"Maybe *yours* isn't, Theleh — but, then, your hungers have not been very demanding of late. A sign of surrender."

"Go to him, Hrul, and ask him for food. He won't refuse."

Atmega, who had come upon her spouses in the course of this argument, put in, "No one wishes to enter the labyrinths, Theleh. I've heard that Verlis is growing further copies of himself in metal troughs. Pelsu says that he has heard these beings speaking and laughing — the echoes of their voices haunt him at night. Soon they will rise from their troughs and walk as we do. An army of Verlises, over which the old man will have a sterner command than Evmauna has over us."

"I saw nothing like this when I entered the metal inside the rock, Atmega. The only images of himself he had were his old skins on the wall."

"That was a long time ago. How many rooms did you enter?"

"Only one. A very large one."

"Then what do you know of what is happening now, Theleh?"

Hrul remained silent during this exchange, curiously silent, and the following morning Pelsu — who claimed to have heard voices echoing outward from the Labyrinth — found a ripped and battered effigy of the old man hanging in the tunnel entrance through which Verlis had once led Theleh to his work room. The dummy, a crude thing made of leit-cloth and weed-wheat ticking, had ashes smeared across its face. Pelsu hurried to tell the others, and in a little while

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everyone at Adiro but Verlis had gathered to watch his effigy revolve limply in the morning breeze — an impotent, shoddy replica of the one person among them who understood the dimensions of the Dying People's predicament. Theleh was outraged.

"Help me," she said. "Help me cut it down."

No one moved.

"Evmauna," Theleh said pleadingly.

At last Evmauna came forward, lifted Theleh to her shoulders, and held the girl still beneath the dummy so that she could cut it free with her knife. When it was down, Theleh methodically dismembered it, ripped open its torso, and strewed its ticking out over the gorge in defiant handfuls. She wanted the perpetrator of this petty wickedness to know her anger, and she hoped that Hrul had some insight into the depth and certainty of her knowledge.

In small numbers the iguabi returned to the gorge. Hunting parties went out, and slew them, and came back to Adiro with hides on their belts and meat in their long-empty booty sacks. The days of near famine were over for a time, and the smell of roasting flesh ascended from the many fires on the cliffs. The people feasted, and one evening a small party of Dying People who lived to the south came into their midst and asked their hospitality. This — now that Theleh's people had plenty — was ungrudgingly given. Everyone ate and talked.

After a time Verlis appeared. "As the oldest here at Adiro," he told Evmauna, "I should have been summoned to receive our guests."

"We didn't know how to summon you," Evmauna said, clearly temporizing. She hadn't even thought of calling the old man to their feast, Theleh knew, but she could not admit this to him.

"You might have sent Theleh."

"Please, Verlis, you are here now," Evmauna said in an excess of courtesy. "Sit with us and eat."

"How is it that he should eat with us when he did nothing to contribute to our feast?" Hrul asked loudly from Theleh's right. "It's fortunate that we have meat at all, considering Verlis's ability to frighten off game."

Everyone looked at the boy. The faces of their guests, Theleh noted, were full of surprise and tentative censure.

"He eats with us by age-right," Evmauna said.

"I think he would have forfeited any claim on our stores," Hrul insisted, "by denying us his when we were in want. Does age-right abrogate one's obligations to his people?"

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One of the guests stood up, a woman who had apparently known Verlis during a past triple-turning. "How can you speak against this man?"

"What do you know of the concerns of Adiro?" Hrul retorted. "Sit down. Eat of our charity."

Theleh realized that the boy had overreached himself. He had compelled Evmauna to show her authority, and even now the older woman was rising to exercise it. Verlis, understanding the delicacy of Evmauna's position, held his tongue and waited.

"Relinquish your place to Verlis," Evmauna said. "And leave us."

Hrul stood up and crossed to the old man. He put a piece of roasted iguabi in Verlis's hands. "I relinquish not only my place," he said, "but a portion of my kill. Do not choke on it, old one."

He limped away into the darkness, and Theleh, watching him go, was bewildered by how precisely his lameness seemed a reflection of Verlis's age-ridden walk. Was this conscious mockery, or did the boy always favor his bad foot in this way? Theleh, quite unhappy, could like neither Hrul nor Verlis very much now. Why hadn't the old man stayed in his tunnels, as he had for so long seemed content to do?

Theleh excused herself early. Hrul was not in the place that she and Atmega nightly shared with the boy....

Several days passed. Their guests had long since gone back to their own encampments, and Verlis didn't come out of his residence in the rock at all. Pelsu spoke again of ghostly laughter in the tunnels, and even Atmega had fallen completely to the rumors of a weed-wheat army with Verlis's face. More than likely, she said, he would use this army to avenge himself on Hrul and any others who had affronted him. He had even got to the point of making female Verlises so that his creations could mate sexually and reproduce endless copies of himself. The man's vanity was more dangerous than the Dying People's barrenness.

"Once he allows them to come into the light," Atmega told Theleh, "it won't even be possible to slay the old man. We will not know which of the many Verlises we see is the true one."

"He will be the oldest," Theleh said. "You needn't worry."

She herself, however, worried and continued to worry. No one had spoken before, even hypothetically, of slaying Verlis, and that Atmega should do so seemed an ominous alteration in her friend. Had Pelsu's rumors so poisoned her spirit that she could now think seriously of the

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most heinous of all crimes on Hond as a redemptive one? Had Hrul been talking to her of the old man's "dangerousness?" The Dying People, Theleh feared, were dying before their time.

Several more days passed, and Verlis went on playing the hermit. He did not even come out of his fortress to take a little of the morning sun, and this neglect of a somewhat habitual action began to unnerve Theleh. So, too, did the fact that the rumors of imminent attack by an army of Verlis's caricatures were a thing of the past — no one spoke against Verlis at all anymore, for no one so much as mentioned his name. It was as if the old man had never existed.

One night Theleh grabbed Hrul by the arm and turned the boy toward her with a rude yank. "Where is Verlis?"

He smiled and removed her hand. "In his metal labyrinth."

"You're lying, Hrul!"

"I jest sometimes," Hrul informed her, "but I never lie." He stretched himself out langorously and showed the girl his naked back. The boy was not lying, Theleh realized; and she understood, too, that if Verlis was indeed in his metal labyrinth, he was probably dead.

While the others slept, Theleh crossed the wind-swept summit of the cliff and found herself standing before the tunnel where someone — Hrul, perhaps — had strung up the effigy of the old man. She had gone through it once before. Why should she quail at navigating it a second time? The answer to her question was self-evident: she didn't wish to find what she knew she must. But putting aside both her fear and her people's prohibition against entering the sheath inside the rock, Theleh stepped into the silver-black corridor and followed it to its first turning.

She heard no laughter, no conversation, no hint at all of an unnatural army in sinister bivouac. All she heard were the terrible rhythms of her own breathing and the flute sounds the wind made across the tunnel mouth.

As if activated by her presence, a cylinder of light surrounded Theleh. She walked through it to the room where Verlis had showed her his rune-embossed seeds. His old skins were still on the wall, as were the diamond-shaped shields with their engraven hieroglphys. But the glassware that had once graced the room's counters now lay scattered across the floor in jagged, glittering fragments — like tiny galaxies of glass. Looking at this debris, Theleh felt that the entire night sky had just fallen in upon her and broken at her feet.

"Verlis!"

No one answered.

Then the girl saw that one of the

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double-plated doors beyond the last counter was open. Gingerly, being careful of her feet, she crossed the room and went through this door into a chamber lined with metal troughs.

Verlis lay on the floor with his throat slit, his ninth skin still clinging tenaciously to his frail bones. The smell of decomposition was harsh and overpowering. Somehow Theleh did not fall back from it. As if in a trance, she went about the chamber and saw for herself the butchery in the nutrient-filled beds lining the walls. What she saw recalled the harvest of Verlis's garden in which she had once, long ago, taken part. Nausea beset the girl like a wind, but she fought the attack and triumphed over it.

Kneeling beside Verlis, horrified by what the old man had become in his death, Theleh freed him from his mortality — as Evmauna had once freed Denlot from an intimation of his. The last skin Verlis would ever wear. Theleh put it about her shoulders and retreated purposefully from the slaughterhouse.

"Hrul," she said.

The boy woke up and turned toward her on his slab. When it seemed to her that he was alert enough to plumb her motives, Theleh lifted her knife from its scabbard and showed it to him. His face clouded. Before he could summon the intelligence to thwart her, she used the knife to slit his throat.

Flailing an arm, Hrul lurched upward and staggered out into the night. Then he fell to the ground and lay upon it spurting blood.

Atmega screamed, "What have you done? Your brother, your husband!"

"He murdered Verlis. Therefore, this."

"Pelsu and Evmauna murdered Verlis," Atmega cried. "The rest of us merely destroyed the old man's bastard children. Hrul could never have taken one of the true people's lives, Theleh — not even Verlis's. Evmauna and Pelsu did so only to preserve the rest of us."

A crowd had gathered. All of the Dying People of Adiro were there to see her with blood on her hands.

"But I —" Theleh began.

"You were not told," Evmauna said, pushing her way to the fore, "because of your affection for the old man. We didn't wish to implicate you."

Theleh stared at the woman. No one spoke. At last the girl threw down her knife and wept openly, tearlessly.

"We have all turned murderer," she managed. "We are dying, and we have all turned murderer to speed the process." She took Atmega's hand from her arm. "Let go

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of me. From this day forward, I have no people."

She moved her belongings several hundred strides from the main encampment at Adiro, and no one tried to stop her. She made herself a home in the rocks, wearing the old man's ninth skin as a cloak against the cold. That this was against custom had no significance for her or any of the others.

The effigy of Verlis in her path nods blankly, rattles in the wind. The law, to which she has refused to subscribe for nearly three sheddings, says that she must uproot the thing and crush it underfoot. But how long has it been since she or anyone else has seen one? Theleh cannot adjust to her discovery that here on the gorge bottom another of the old man's weed-wheat persons has lifted its crippled head from the dust.

There is wonder in the fact. Wonder and hope.

But if anyone else sees this thing, Theleh knows that they will interpret it as an evil omen. They will view it as Verlis's last insult from the aftertime, a fleer at the inevitability of their extinction.

These considerations in mind, Theleh pulls the plant from the ground and crushes it underfoot. For a moment she believes that Verlis's effigy has gasped her name, has tried to dissuade her from its murder — but the heat has more than likely influenced her imagination in this. She gazes down at the plant's travesty of a face and holds at bay her gathering remorse.

Verlis, forgive me. I have killed another of your offspring. How is it that something so imperfect can be so haunting? How is it that its death should so deeply wound me?

In the wind sweeping across the gorge there is nothing at all of Verlis's soothing voice. Theleh listens, and there is only the equivocal promise of the wind.

Fantasy & Science Fiction Index

The 4 Hills Press of Lebanon, New Hampshire has just published a cumulative author/title index to *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, covering Volumes 1 to 54 (Fall 1949 through June 1978). The 99-page index (multilithed, unbound) costs $4.25 postpaid. Send check or money order, payable to Josiah F. Hill, to the press at 24 Messenger St., Lebanon, N.H. 03766.

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TOWARD ZERO

When I was young, I learned the rudiments of English grammar in grade school, and since I quickly learned everything I was taught (either by teachers or by books), I gained the impression that I knew English grammar. Since I hardly ever forget anything I was ever taught, I continued to remain under the impression, as the years passed, that I knew English grammar.

This was a good impression for me to have, for you can imagine how it would have disturbed my sense of inner security, if I had known that I was making a living as a writer and *didn't* know English grammar.

But then, four or five years ago, long after I had become established as a writer and had even received praise for the skill and clarity with which I wrote, I picked up a college text on grammar and leafed through it with a condescending air.

That condescension vanished quickly. Not only did it turn out, almost at once, that I knew scarcely anything about English grammar above the grade-school level — but I didn't even know the terminology. I closed the book a shaken man, and from that day to this I've never

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had the nerve to argue with a copy-reader.

Of course, I retain my grade-school level of knowledge. I know some simple rules, such as the one that says you can't use comparatives or superlatives for adjectives that represent absolute qualities.

For instance, something that is unique stands absolutely alone. Nothing, therefore, can be "more unique" than something else, and you can't speak of anything as the "most unique" of its class. Similarly, since "perfect" implies no flaws at all, you can't take something that is "perfect" and talk of making it "more perfect," since you can't have fewer than no flaws.

You want to bet on that? Let's see —

In last month's essay, I was talking about the liquefaction of gases and the attaining of low temperatures. By the end of the essay, we were in the early 1890s, and oxygen and nitrogen had been liquefied. Temperatures of about -200° C., or about 70 degrees above absolute zero (70° K.), had been attained.

Oxygen and nitrogen had been liquefied by means of the Joule-Thomson effect. This describes what happens when a gas is allowed to expand. When this happens, the molecules, in moving apart, must overcome the tiny attractions between them. It takes energy to do this, and the molecules must obtain the energy from somewhere. The most immediately available energy is that of their own heat, and so the temperature of the expanding gas drops.

Another way of looking at it is this. The molecules of gas at a particular temperature are moving at some average speed. If the gas is allowed to expand and the molecules move apart, the slight attractions between them pull at the molecules and slow down that speed. Since the average speed of moving molecules is a measure of the temperature, the slowing of the speed means that the temperature drops.

The expanded gas, which is colder than it was when it started, can now be used to cool off a second sample of gas that is still unexpanded. If this cooled second sample is now allowed to expand, its temperature drops lower still. This still colder gas is used to cool an unexpanded sample which is allowed to expand — and so on. Eventually, the gas is cooled to the point of liquefaction.

But the Joule-Thomson effect works only because there is that slight attraction between the molecules. For different gases, there is a different degree of attraction, and the smaller the attraction, the lower the liquefac-

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tion point. After all, a gas only turns to liquid because once the molecules move slowly enough, they lack the energy to overcome the attraction, and therefore collapse into contact. The lower the intermolecular attraction, the more slowly the molecules must move (the lower the temperature) before they fail to overcome the attraction, and liquefy.

If there were no attraction at all between the molecules, then a gas would never liquefy but would remain a gas even at absolute zero. Such a substance would then be a "perfect gas" or an "ideal gas."

In the case of a perfect gas, expansion would not have to overcome the mutual attraction of molecules, however slight, so that no energy would have to be withdrawn from the gas, and the temperature would not fall. The temperature change on expansion would be zero, and the Joule-Thomson effect would therefore not exist in a perfect gas.

Chlorine at ordinary temperatures is not a very close approach to a perfect gas; fluorine is better, oxygen still better, nitrogen even better. You would expect that hydrogen, which remains gaseous even at temperatures of liquid nitrogen, would have a smaller intermolecular attraction than any of the liquefied gases and would represent a still better approach to the perfect gas than any of them.

But it would still only be an approach. Hydrogen would be a nearly perfect gas, but surely never a quite perfect one. The Joule-Thomson effect would be smaller for hydrogen, but we would still presume it to be there. Though cooling through expansion would be a more tedious process for hydrogen than for oxygen or nitrogen, surely it would work eventually and end by liquefying hydrogen.

Not so! When hydrogen was allowed to expand under conditions that would have cooled oxygen or nitrogen, the Joule-Thomson effect did not work. It was not merely that hydrogen did not cool on expansion, as might be the case if it were a perfect gas; hydrogen actually warmed on expansion. The Joule-Thomson effect went into reverse!

As a result, some chemists began to speak of hydrogen as a "more-than-perfect" gas.

There you are, grammarians! Chemists know exactly what they mean by a perfect gas, and hydrogen is more perfect; or, if you prefer, hydrogen is perfecter.

But how do we explain this?

Since about 1800, the relationship between the pressure, volume and temperature of a gas could be expressed by means of a very simple equa-

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tion, called an "equation of state."

If a gas is well above its liquefaction point, the equation of state expresses the properties of the gas almost exactly. The lower the temperature, the less exact the expression is. In this sense, you could define a perfect gas as one for which the equation of state is the exact expression of its properties at all temperatures. By this definition no real gas is quite perfect, not even hydrogen.

In 1873, the Dutch physicist Johannes Diderik Van der Waals (1837-1923) was the first to modify the equation of state in such a way as to make it apply reasonably well to real gases at all temperatures.

He suggested that the source of the imperfection lay in the fact that real gases had a small intermolecular attraction and that, in addition, the gas molecules had a definite, albeit small, size. In a perfect gas, the intermolecular attraction would be zero and the volume of the molecules would be zero.

Van der Waals introduced two constants, *a* and *b*, into the equation of state. The first, *a*, was related to the intermolecular attraction and the second, *b*, to the molecular volume. For each gas, *a* and *b* had definite values characteristic of that gas.

If the equation of state were modified to include *a* and *b*, it would describe the properties of a particular gas much better than the original "perfect-gas" equation of state would.

The equation that describes the Joule-Thomson effect, as deduced from Van der Waals equation of state, includes the expression:

$$\frac{2a}{RT} - b$$

In this expression, *a* and *b* are the Van der Waals constants, which are different for each gas: *R* is the "gas constant," which is the same for all gases, and *T* is the absolute temperature.

As long as the value of $2a/RT$ is greater than *b*, then $2a/RT - b$ is a positive number and there is a Joule-Thomson effect. The smaller the positive number, the smaller the Joule-Thomson effect.

In a perfect gas, *a* and *b* would both be equal to zero, and in that case $2a/RT - b$ would be 0 - 0, or 0. For a perfect gas, there would be no Joule-Thomson effect.

Since the value of *b* is very small, always smaller than *a* and usually much smaller, it is not surprising that $2a/RT$ is larger than *b* and that the value of the expression is positive.

For any given gas, though, the values of *a*, *b*, and *R* are constant and

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do not change. The value of T, however, represents the temperature, and that is easily changed. If we warm any gas, the value of T goes up. Since T is in the denominator of a fraction, its increasing value means that the value of $2a/RT$ goes down. (Consider the fractions: 1/2, 1/4, 1/8...)

As the temperature goes up and the value of $2a/RT$ goes down, a point is reached, finally where $2a/RT$ becomes smaller than b. The expression $2a/RT - b$ then becomes negative. The Joule-Thomson effect does not merely cease; it goes into reverse.

For every gas, there is some temperature, the "inversion temperature," above which the Joule-Thomson effect goes into reverse.

That does not, however, mean that the gas is more than perfect. Whether the value of $2a/RT - b$ is positive or negative doesn't matter; that value arises only because a and b both have certain positive values and the gas is therefore not perfect. If the gas were perfect, a and b would both be zero and the expression would never be either positive or negative, but would always work out to zero. Even at the inversion temperature, where the value of the expression *is* zero, that is merely because one aspect of imperfection just happens to cancel the other aspect.

So the grammarian is right after all!

For most gases, the value of a is in the neighborhood of a hundred times that of b, and the temperature must rise pretty high to lower the value of $2a/RT$ to the point where it is equal to b. For oxygen, the inversion temperature is at 1058° K.

This is an enormously high temperature by ordinary standards, and certainly no one attempting to liquefy oxygen would begin with oxygen any warmer than room temperature, which is usually just under 300° K.

As gases approach the perfect, the values of a and b both drop, but a drops the faster. Thus, for hydrogen, the value of a is only 9 times greater than b. This means that the inversion temperature has got to be far lower for hydrogen than for oxygen.

For hydrogen, the inversion temperature is 190° K. The Joule-Thomson effect is in reverse for hydrogen, therefore, whenever its temperature is higher than it would be in an Antarctica winter at its coldest.

Before hydrogen can be cooled down by the Joule-Thomson effect, then, it must first be cooled down in some other way to get it below its inversion temperature. James Dewar, to whom I referred toward the end of last month's essay, realized this and used liquid nitrogen for the preliminary cooling of hydrogen gas.

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Once hydrogen was at liquid nitrogen temperatures, it was well below its inversion temperature, and the Joule-Thomson effect could be used to cool it further. In 1895, Dewar finally obtained liquid hydrogen in quantity.

Hydrogen has a liquefaction point of 20.3° K. When liquid hydrogen is allowed to evaporate, its molecules rush apart into vapor, and the energy required for that is withdrawn from what remains of the liquid. The temperature of the liquid hydrogen drops, and part of it solidifies while part of it evaporates. The solidification point of hydrogen is 14.0° K.

At liquid hydrogen temperatures — 14.0° K. to 20.3°K. — almost everything has become solid. Nitrogen solidifies at 63.3° K. and oxygen at 54.7° K. Even neon which, like hydrogen, is gaseous at liquid nitrogen temperatures, liquefies at 27.2° K. and solidifies at 24.5° K.

Only one substance, helium, remains a gas at liquid hydrogen temperatures. Dewar failed to liquefy it, and it remained the one unconquered gas as the 20th Century opened.

Helium was tackled by a Dutch physicist, Heike Kamerlingh-Onnes (1853-1926), who established the first elaborately equipped laboratory to be devoted entirely to low temperature work. Helium was even more nearly perfect than hydrogen and, for it, *a* was only 1.5 times as large as *b* so that its inversion temperature was even lower than that of hydrogen.

Kamerlingh-Onnes used liquid hydrogen itself for a preliminary cooling of helium and brought its temperature low enough for the Joule-Thomson effect to take over. In 1908, Kamerlingh-Onnes liquefied helium at a temperature of 4.2° K.

He then allowed the liquid helium to evaporate in an attempt to lower its temperature still further and obtain solid helium, but he didn't succeed. He managed to get the helium temperature down to 0.83° K. before he died, but it remained stubbornly liquid.

In 1926, though, a few months after Kamerlingh-Onnes died, his coworker, Willem Keesom, applied pressure to very cold liquid helium and managed to solidify it at last.

As it happens, liquid helium, at ordinary pressures, stays liquid right down to absolute zero. The uncertainty principle requires that atoms and molecules retain some residual energy of motion even at absolute zero, and so small is the intermolecular attraction of helium atoms that even this irreducible residual energy is enough to keep helium from solidifying. At temperatures below 1.0° K., however, pressure will do the trick.

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With helium liquefied and solidified, the game would seem to be over. There would seem to be no purpose to be gained in getting rid of that final degree of temperature. In fact, there would seem to be not only no purpose, but no possibility, either.

In 1906, the German chemist Hermann Walther Nernst (1864-1941) worked out what is called the third law of thermodynamics. From that third law one can deduce that halving the absolute temperature always takes the same effort regardless of the starting point.

If you start at 4° K., for instance, you can with a certain effort reach 2° K. An equivalent effort will next bring you to 1° K; then to 1/2° K.; then to 1/4° K.; then to 1/8° K., and so on.

You will keep approaching the absolute zero more and more closely, but the road ahead will remain just as long, in terms of effort, as it ever was, no matter how close you get in terms of temperature figures. It will take an infinite effort to reach absolute zero — which means that in real terms, you can never reach it.

And, indeed, when Kamerlingh-Onnes and Keesom were trying to get lower and lower temperatures in order to solidify helium, it was like slogging through hardening cement. The advance was slower and slower and stalled at about 0.4° K.

Yet scientists couldn't quit.

In 1911, Kamerlingh-Onnes had been measuring the electrical resistance of mercury at lower and lower temperatures. He was quite certain that the resistance would get lower and lower and approach zero as he approached a temperature of absolute zero. It would be nice, though, to have actual observations of the fact.

But then, at 4.12° K., a temperature well above absolute zero, the resistance of the mercury dropped to nothing — not just to nearly nothing but to an actual *zero* as nearly as our best measurements can tell us. An electrical current which is initiated in a ring of mercury at temperatures below 4.12° K. continues indefinitely without any sign of diminution.

The phenomenon is called "superconductivity," and it has been found in a variety of other metals and alloys, each with a different critical temperature below which it becomes superconductive. A few alloys have been found to become superconductive at temperatures of over 20° K., or just within the liquid hydrogen range.

The phenomenon was so unusual that scientists were galvanized into activity. It had to be further studied.

It is now quite clear that understanding superconductivity, as well as

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other peculiar phenomena observed in the neighborhood of absolute zero, requires the subtle application of quantum theory. It is only at very low temperatures, when the random, jittery, every-which-way motion of atoms, which we refer to as heat, is suppressed, that the quantum theory effects can make themselves felt; and a study of these effects can then give us some very basic understanding of how matter behaves.

(To be crass about it, superconducitivity can also have some very important practical uses in terms of transporting electrical power, setting up ultra-strong magnets, building ultra-efficient computers, and so on, and so on, and so on.)

After 1911, therefore, the search for ever lower temperatures became not just a record-setting advance, but a push forward to study odd phenomena that could not be approached in any other way.

The technique of allowing gases to expand and liquids to evaporate had reached dead end in the 1920s at about half a degree removed from absolute zero. Something else was needed.

In 1926, the Dutch chemist Peter Joseph Wilhelm Debye (1884-1966) and the American chemist William Francis Giauque (1895-) independently suggested a new technique.

The idea involved the use of certain paramagnetic salts, such as gadolinium sulfate. In such salts, the metal atoms act like tiny magnets. In the presence of a strong magnetic field, all the atoms line up in one direction and the salt is magnetized. If the magnetic field is removed, the atoms jiggle around randomly and the salt loses its magnetic properties.

In magnetizing the salt, work is done on it, and its temperature rises. This is analogous to the way in which the temperature of a gas goes up when you compress it.

Contrariwise, when the magnetized salt loses its magnetism, the atoms do work pulling part from each other and gain the energy to do so from their own heat content so that the temperature falls. This is analogous to the way in which the temperature of a gas goes down when you let it expand.

Instead of the usual method of refrigerating by alternately compressing and expanding a gas, always cooling the compressed gas before you allow it to expand, you could perform the analogous task of magnetizing and demagnetizing a paramagnetic salt, always cooling the magnetized salt before allowing it to demagnetize.

If you magnetize such a salt and then cool it in evaporating liquid hel-

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ium so that its temperature, while magnetized, is brought to 0.8° K., and *then* allow it to demagnetize, the temperature drops precipitously. (To be sure, it will only drop a few tenths of a degree, since that's all there's room for, but such a drop at such a starting temperature is equivalent to an enormous drop at ordinary temperatures — so states the third law of thermodynamics.)

It wasn't till 1933 that Giauque could get the system to working properly. In that year, he used gadolinium sulfate to produce a temperature of 0.25° K. That same year, Dutch chemists using cerium fluoride obtained a temperature of 0.13° K., and then later in the year, using cerium ethyl sulfate, a temperature of 0.0185° K.

By 1933, then, scientists were suddenly within 1/12 of a degree of absolute zero. Since then, the use of the magnetization technique has brought temperatures as low as 0.003° K.

So far, I have been talking about helium as though it were a substance. It isn't. It is a mixture of two substances. One is helium-4, with an atomic nucleus made up of two protons and two neutrons and the other is helium-3, with an atomic nucleus made up of two protons and one neutron.

The two substances are by no means identical. For instance, helium-3 is only three-fourths as dense as helium-4 is, in the gaseous state. At low temperatures there are some very important additional differences.

These low-temperature differences were not immediately apparent since helium-3 is so uncommon as to be very hard to work with in reasonable quantity. Helium itself is not a very common substance, to begin with, and, in nature, only 1 helium atom out of a million is helium-3.

It was not till after World War II that helium-3 began to be studied as a substance in its own right, and not till 1949 that it was liquefied. It turned out that helium-3 has a lower liquefaction point than helium-4 does and that it holds the absolute record in this respect.

At a temperature of 4.2° K., when helium (actually helium-4) liquefies, helium-3, if it could be purified in perceptible quantities would be seen to be still a gas even at that low point on the temperature scale. The liquefaction point of helium-3 is 3.2° K.

In 1928, Keesom had discovered that at 2.2° K., helium-4 changed from one liquid of normal properties (helium I) essentially like those of liquids generally, into another kind of liquid (helium II) that existed only at temperatures below 2.2° K. and had properties that were utterly differ-

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ent from anything observed in any other substance.

Helium II was, for instance, "superfluid" and could move through very small orifices without any measurable friction. A substance could be gas-tight without being helium-II-tight. By 1938, the Soviet scientist Peter Leonodovich Kapitza (1894-) was studying such helium II properties in detail.

Helium-3 did not show a helium II phase at any temperature that could be reached, and there was an attempt to get closer and closer to absolute zero to obtain a helium-II version of helium-3. Its presence or absence would affect the theories being worked out for low-temperature behavior.

In 1956, the American physicists William Martin Fairbank (1917-) and Geoffrey Kind Walters (1931-) discovered that helium-3 and helium-4 did not mix with each other freely at all temperatures. At temperatures below 0.88° K., a mixture of the two separated into two liquids, one of which was high in helium-3 and one of which was low.

In 1962, the German-English physicist Heinz London (1907-) suggested that these separated liquids be used as a refrigeration device. If the two liquids are in contact, and if helium-3 is pumped away from the liquid which is already low in helium-3 (7 percent helium-3 and 94 percent helium-4), that helium-3 is replaced by an influx from the high (almost 100 percent) helium-3 liquid.

The helium-3 atoms moving out of the high helium-3 liquid are predominantly the fastest moving ones. Those that remain behind have a lower average speed, and this is equivalent to a drop in the temperature.

The helium-3 pumped off from the low-helium-3 liquid can be cooled and then added to the high-helium-3 liquid so that the process is made continuous. Using this helium-3 method, temperature can be reduced to at least as low a mark as those produced by magnetization but with a further advantage —

By magnetization, very low temperatures could only be maintained for a couple of hours; but in using helium-3, very low temperatures could be maintained for weeks.

In 1965, the helium-3 method was producing temperatures of 0.20° K. and since then a combination of the helium-3 and magnetization methods have produced temperatures as low as 0.00002° K. — temperatures within 1/50,000 of a degree of absolute zero.

And in 1972, it was found that helium-3 *did* shift to a helium-II liquid form at temperatures below 0.0025° K.

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This is Terry Carr's first story here since "Sleeping Beauty," May 1967. Since then he has edited thirty or forty sf anthologies, including the Universe *series and* Best Science Fiction of the Year. *He now lives in the Bay area and writes: "My stories have been appearing mostly in original anthologies of late. Pyramid published a collection of my stories,* The Light At the End of the Universe *in 1976; six of the fifteen stories were from F&SF. Bobbs-Merrill brought out my first novel,* Cirque, *in 1977."*

Virra

by TERRY CARR

at the last
judgement we will all be trees
—Margaret Atwood

I am walking; I am leaving my family, stepping past them day by day with hardly time for talk. Soon I shall be beyond them all, alone in fields where no roots touch.

I enter the dim clearing caused when Morden fell, bringing down with him three others of the family. Morden was one of our oldest, a giant who commanded the sun for thirty meters around. Lightning wounded him; years later he fell.

He is not dead. Fresh limbs reach straight up from his side while all others are crumbling and covered with ice; he has put all his blood into these new limbs. As I skirt his roots I see that two are still in place, still feeding. I trip over one, underground.

"Who is it?" asks Morden drowsily. "Who are you?"

"Wesk. I am Wesk." (I am dreadfully afraid of him. From earliest memory I have been told Morden would strangle the sun if I angered him.)

"Are you such a child, Wesk, that you are unable to feel when roots are near?" His voice is like winter blood, slow and thick.

"No, sir. I apologize for disturbing you. I was hurrying, and I am ... afraid of you, sir."

Morden's laughter shakes his few leaves. "Then if you are not young, you lack understanding. How could one so old as I harm you? I lie on my side, catching the sun of noon, in shade the rest of the time. As the family grows over me, they take away even the noon."

I continue to move around him, feeling more carefully now as I slip

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my roots into the soil. Touching shallowly, barely penetrating the crisp ice that covers the ground even in summer.

"I am only passing," I say. "I shall not steal your sun."

"Where are you going? Is there more sun nearby?"

"No," I say, "but there was one who carried the sun with her. I am seeking her."

"Phaw! No one carries the sun; your roots are feeding in a cavern, your thoughts are starved."

I am nearly past Morden now, and I take courage. "But I saw her as she passed. She moved so quickly! She was small and unable to reach up for sun, but she carried light in her leaves. Her name is Virra."

Morden laughs deeply, causing my roots to tremble. I pause while I regrip the soil.

"So the quick ones still live," he says sardonically. "Beware of them, child; they are leftovers of the past. You might as well chase insects."

I move away from his root-drainage, but I hesitate and take time to feed in the soil. The sun is overhead now, and I stretch my branches upward; energy makes me giddy and foolish. "Insects exist only in tales for children," I say challengingly.

Morden shifts a limb with surprising swiftness in my direction; it intercepts the sun and I am left in shadow. "There *were* insects," he says. "I saw one during my second ring. The creature was hardly the size of a bud, but it flew faster than sight. Then it fell, and died. I believe it was the last."

"If you could not see it, how could you know of it?" I ask, edging away. There is another patch of sunlight nearby.

Again his root-shaking laughter comes, but I am further away now and it hardly touches me. "I saw it when it had fallen. Later I ate it."

My curiosity is aroused. "What did it look like? Is it true that the insects had no leaves at all, no limbs?"

"It was ugly." The soil ripples around my roots: is Morden shuddering? "It searched my leaves for blossoms, and its touch was disgusting. We once reproduced by making leaves of pretty colors, you know, and scents like the whores of legend. We needed the insects then, to carry our seed, but no more."

He is rambling, as so many of the aged do. They love to talk of the past, and they seem to take special delight in grotesque tales. I drink the sun, and say respectfully, "How awful for you to be touched by such a thing."

"Yes, but the insect got nothing from me, or anyone. It fell, they all fell, and our pure seeds fed on the ground they enriched." Morden's voice is growing dimmer as the sun

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passes; he says dreamily, "The one of whom you speak is like the insects — fast-movers, strangers to peace. They will soon be gone."

I walk on, refusing to believe this. Virra was too beautiful for me to conceive of her dying. I remember the day she passed by me, moving so quickly she was almost gone before I could hail her. Smaller than a sapling, she moved with sureness and grace, holding her supple, leaf-clustered limbs away from any touch with the rest of us.

"Wait," I called after her. "What are you?"

"I am Virra," she said. "And I can't wait; I'm returning to the field, where giants don't steal all the sun."

"We do not steal!" I cried; but she was nearly out of hearing range. She moved like limbs dancing in wind, her tiny roots touching the soil so shallowly that she seemed a mass of drifting leaves. But she was bright with inner-held sun. "Wait!" I called again. "I want to talk, to know you!"

"Then come to the field."

So I am walking, going on a journey longer than anyone in my family has made. I am still young; I can do it. Already I have passed Morden, who has grown silent in his shade.

The way is easy, for every year there are fewer of the family; there is always much room between us, and only the decaying bodies of fallen ancestors to block my path. I skirt them easily, for their roots have long since passed back into the earth. Mindless ferns offer no resistance to my passage.

I speak to no one for three days, moving quickly past the elders who stand dreaming in the sun, feeding in the earth below the ice. I pause for an hour here or there when I find unused sun. There is enough to replenish my energy, but my roots are becoming brittle and frayed from so much exposure to the air, and I notice I am leaving sap in my back-trail of rootings. Perhaps this journey will be more difficult than I thought.

I come to the place where Querca stands: she whose drainage extends for scores of meters from her trunk. Old as she is, she has recently dropped acorns; they punctuate my path, and several have melted through to the soil where they may take root. But I am fearful now because my own roots are bleeding. So I do not skirt her ground; I pause hardly an hour in sun before hurling myself across her shade.

I have traversed little more than half of it when she notices me. "Who is it?" she rumbles. "I can see you are young — have you no respect?"

Frightened, I blurt, "Have you seen one passing who carried sun-

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light in her leaves?"

I am able to take several more root-steps before I hear Querca chuckle (she drops an acorn that is still green), and she says, "You mean a *bush?*"

I shiver at the scorn in her voice and grip underground stones to steady myself. "I do not know her family, only that she lives in the field. What is a 'bush'?"

"Nothing; a bush is nothing. The ferns serve more purpose — at least they feed us when they die."

"But this ... bush ... has a mind. Her name is Virra."

Querca moves roots languidly, easing into soft, fresh earth. "Bushes have no memory. They have no need to remember, because they die so soon. What does it matter that this creature has a mind, if she cannot remember?"

Anxiety strikes me, and I pause in my traversal of Querca's icy shade. "Do you mean she will not remember me when I find her?"

"Hah! Remember you?" Querca slowly bends down over me, mingling her brittle branches with my young ones; I draw back involuntarily at the touch of dry, aging leaves. "The bushes have no past, nor any future. They have been driven from the family and must live alone in the open field. They sprout and die almost while we sleep."

"But she did *think!*" I am approaching the edge of Querca's shade now, and I take courage. "Even her thoughts were full of sunlight, and she did not hoard it as the old ones of the family do."

"Exactly," says Querca. "They throw away their thoughts and do not think them again." Her limbs lift away from mine as I pass from beneath her. "They waste the past just as they waste the sun. The sun is old; it was not always small as it is now. We have a duty to use its energy wisely, but *bushes* have no care for that."

"I shall ask her about wasting the sun," I say, moving at last out of Querca's shade and stepping carefully along a slope strewn with the crumbling remains of ancient ancestors. "But must we talk so much about the past?"

This rouses anger in Querca. "*Yes*, we must talk of it, for we used up the sun! We were so different — creatures that ran and ran, burning the sun within us till it was almost gone. The bushes are still like that: they are enemies!" She dips a giant bough. "How are you named?"

"I am Wesk. You do not know me."

"I shall know you in the future," Querca promises.

Her words are like frost, but I continue walking. I am free of Querca's shade and her voice now. I continue across the sun-dappled

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slope; the ancients of the family only glance at me. There are fewer of them than before, further apart: I am coming to the family's edge, to the beginning of the field.

There is a strange form of life here, one that we see seldom in the deeper forest-family. Slim green trunks rise from the ground; they are only centimeters high, and they have no limbs. Their very trunks are their leaves. In that way they are like the ferns, but they are much simpler creatures. Ancient tales call them grasses, and this is as good a name as any, since, like the ferns, they cannot think and tell us a name for themselves.

Here too are the hermits, those who stand away from the edge of the family and think only to themselves. They spread great limbs wide and luxuriate in the energy of the red sun; but their roots feed on the shallow loam of grasses, and it is said within the family that the hermits must one day return to our ground for sustenance.

My roots stumble across one of the hermits, for it lies shallow in the ground, and I wake her from a morning sleep. "Go away," she grumbles, still half-dreaming. "Whoever you are."

I wonder briefly if she will ever be able to return to the family, since I have felt how stiff her roots are. "My name is Wesk. Have you seen the bush who recently visited the forest-family?"

"No. Go away from me." She spreads her limbs even more wide, hoping to induce me to move off in search of sun.

"Her name is Virra," I say, obediently hurrying toward the edge of the hermit's shade.

"I have nothing to do with bushes. I have nothing to do with anyone."

"Then farewell," I say as I reach the sun again, "and may your thoughts of yourself be rewarding." I intend this as an insult, for I am annoyed by the hermit's rejection, but as I move on I feel only contentment from her.

Night comes and goes before I reach the next hermit in my path; he stands alone on a small hillock held together by his roots, and so I surmise that he is old. I skirt his cold roots, which are surprisingly wide, and say, "I am seeking the bush named Virra; if you know where she is, tell me and I shall travel on more quickly."

I feel his roots move slowly as he rouses. "Virra?" he says sleepily. "Always Virra." He begins to lift his limbs to the morning sun. "Continue on your path and you will find Virra."

The blood surges within me and I press forward through the shallow grasses, giddy with the full sunlight of the field. There are rocks and boulders here, many more than

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there are within the family; some thrust up out of the ground as though they could draw life from the sun. I come to a small creature, a being of leaves like Virra but no more than a summer old.

"I search for a bush who is named Virra," I say, hoping that this young creature will understand me.

"I am a bush," he says. "I am Virra."

"No. You are not the same Virra; you are too small, and you are male."

"Then go further into the field," he says, "and you'll find your Virra."

I move off, in a hurry now that I am nearing the end of my journey, but the young bush is too fast for me: "What are you?" he asks.

"I am Wesk. I am a tree."

The rocks and gravel of the ground are hard on my roots, and the surface ice reaches deeper than that in the family, but I hurry on, using the abundant energy of the sun in open air. There are harsh winds out here, too, and they stir my leaves though I try to hold each to the sun.

"A tree?" says the young bush. "Do trees walk?"

Impudence! I say with calm hauteur, "Trees are the world's nobility; we do whatever we wish." I continue away from this ignorant creature, but my roots are tired and sore again from the hard ground. The bush moves after me, and I am startled by his agility.

"Are you really a tree?" he asks. "Yes, you must be — you're so *big!* Are you older than the rocks?"

I try to ignore him, striding on in silence. I notice with a touch of pride that the back-trail where my roots have sunk into the ground is deep and definite, the sign of a giant stalking the earth.

The bush moves in front of me and stops. "*Are* you? Are you older than rocks?"

"Rocks are not people," I say shortly, altering my course to move around him. "Rocks are dead things."

He laughs suddenly, his ridiculous tiny leaves shaking. "Then *they* are older! Everyone knows the old things are dead, and only the younger ones still living." He studies me critically as I begin to step around him. "But you move so slowly! Are you sick, or do all trees move like invalids?"

Anger courses through me; my leaves quiver and I reach out with my longest limbs to cover him with shade. "Go away."

He does not seem to mind, and I notice that he too, like the Virra I seek, can hold the sun in his leaves. He even turns to follow me as I pass.

"Old creatures are ill-tempered,

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too," he says. "I've heard that the really ancient people, the wonderful meat creatures, were so dissatisfied with the world that they lifted their roots — if they had roots — and flew into the clouds." He giggles. "But when the clouds were gone, so were they."

"I am not a meat creature. Some of them went away, as you say, but those who remained either died or became trees. So you see which of us is the more wonderful: they became us."

I am stepping more rapidly now, as the noon sun softens the ground, but I am still not fast enough to escape this bush. He moves once again, and stands before me.

"You're bad to say such things about the meat creatures. They were so very wonderful; they moved like winter winds and thought great thoughts. You mustn't say bad things about them!"

"Let me pass!" I rumble, stirring the ground so violently with my roots that the bush is pushed backward. I am furious; I reach deliberately for his roots, seize one and hold him still with my greater strength. I move in on him, intending to drop my limbs around him till he is forced into sleep.

But he does an unthinkable thing: he pulls away from his trapped root, deliberately breaking it off as he scurries back beyond my reach. He stops in the sun, slightly uphill from me, and I see his limbs trembling. (Limbs! They are hardly more than twigs!)

We stare at each other for long minutes, until he says, "All right then, go away. You bore me anyway with your slowness."

I regard him a little while longer, wondering if I can somehow reach him before he escapes again. But he would feel my massive roots pushing toward him underground, and in any case my anger is fading: he is, after all, only an ill-mannered child. Without further word I move on, sinking my roots deep through the surface of ice, drinking what sustenance there is in this rocky soil. My bleeding roots ache but I pay no mind, retaining my dignity. Before night comes, he is out of sight behind me.

I choose this night for sleep. It has been days since I rested, and without the surrounding protection of my family I am chilled by the winds of the field. Besides, bushes are so small: I might walk right past Virra in the dark without seeing her.

In the morning, when the dim rays of the sun touch my highest leaves, I wake refreshed, though my roots seem afire with pain when I free them from the ice and resume walking. The pain passes into a dull ache; I walk till the sun touches my naked trunk, and then I notice that

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I am being followed.

No, I am being chased. It is a bush, larger than the one I met yesterday, and female. She is lovely, holding her tiny leaves proudly in the morning breeze, stepping delicately past my deeply dug path. In minutes she overtakes me, for I have paused to wait for her. She settles lightly into the ground near me but not in my shade; I study her.

Her leaves are the color and shape I remember; her branches quiver with controlled excitement, just as Virra's did. The light in her leaves is glorious, each a miniature green sun.

"My name is Virra," she says. "Were you looking for me?"

Her voice in my mind is both familiar and strange. Have I forgotten how she sounded, or has she changed since I saw her among the family? Time must pass more quickly for these swiftly moving creatures, after all.

"I believe I have been searching for you since I was born," I say. "But I did not know it until I saw you."

She laughs, and her rustling leaves make music. "But you're a tree. You must be so *old!*"

"No, I have only fifteen rings."

"Fifteen?" Again her rustling laughter. "Then you've lived twice as long as I have. How could you have been looking for me before I was born?"

My blood pulses through me; I feel giddy. "I suppose I believed in you before I ever saw you."

Her leaves are still for a moment. She says in a strangely subdued tone, "Do trees foresee the future, then?"

"No, but we dream. We have time to think, and there are not so many things in the world to think about. So I think of things that do not exist."

"These are dreams?"

"Waking dreams. I think of things I would wish to exist — people filled with light and joy, like you." I pause, embarrassed.

But she does not seem to resent my familiarity; instead, she lifts her leaves to the sun and turns before me, preening. "Am I as beautiful as you dreamed?"

"Even more beautiful. I could never imagine the way you move, so lightly and surely. You amaze me."

She laughs, and the sound is like light rain in my highest branches. "You're silly," she says. "Are all the trees like you? — No, they can't be; the trees I've seen wouldn't even talk to me."

"My family considers me irresponsible," I admit. "I see you agree with them."

"No!" She stops moving and stands before me sedately now. I see her delicate roots sink into the ground, taking sure purchase. "I think you're wonderful. To be able

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to think of things you've never seen! How fascinating your conversations with your family must be!"

"Alas, no. None of the others ever talk to me of dreams. They tell me to think only of what is real — if not now, then in the past." I sigh, remembering how stern my elders have been with me. "They talk so often of things past.... These are their dreams, but they are not mine."

"Then your dreams are more real than theirs," she says, amused. "You dreamed of me, and here I am."

"Yes, here you are." I am suffused by joy as I realize that I really have found her, at last we are together. The winds of the open field stir my leaves and the ground at my roots seems to shift. — No, it is not the ground that moves: Virra has extended a slender root to touch one of mine. Her touch is as gentle as a caress; hesitantly I reach toward her.

Abruptly she grasps my root and tugs sharply. I recoil, startled rather than hurt, and her root slips away. She backs off quickly, and her laughter rustles softly.

"You're so strong! I've never touched a tree before, but I should have known you'd be strong!"

I am confused by her sudden shift of mood. "Are you mocking me?"

"Oh, no! I'm so tiny beside you, I wouldn't dare! Anyway, you're wonderful and wise, and I'm sure you're gentle, just from seeing how you walk — so calm and dignified. How could I mock you?"

She holds her limbs still as she speaks, as though I were an elder of her family. I feel oddly uncomfortable at this.

"I am simply a tree," I say. "We are a proud family, but I see wonders in you that are new to me. My family descended from the meat people, but yours must have too. No doubt they were different kinds of people who chose to become trees or bushes, but our heritage is the same.... I try to resist my family's pride; please do not tempt me with adulation."

(Yet I remember my scornful rebuke of the ill-mannered bush yesterday. Is this modesty any more appropriate?)

My thoughts are interrupted by another tweaking of my roots: Virra has moved underground again to grasp and jerk at me. She dances lightly away before I can react, and now her laughter is a brook.

"But you're so *serious!*" she cries. "Don't you know you mustn't be serious with bushes?" She pauses. "Have you a name?"

My roots stir the rocks beneath me, but I mutter, "Wesk."

"You're named Wesk? Then please don't be so gloomy, Wesk;

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you're not in the forest now, you're in the sunlight! Be happy with me — oh, please!"

There is such a note of appeal in her voice that I must respond, confused and doubtful as I am. "What should I do?"

"Play with me!" She begins to dance around me, her roots scarcely touching the icy ground; I think of acorns bouncing down a hillside. I look at her in wonder: this is how the swift meat people must have moved when the sun was young.

(I hear Querca's voice in memory: "They waste the sun, but bushes have no care for that.")

"What shall I do?" I ask.

She continues to circle me. "Do you think you can catch me?"

"No, I could never catch you." I recall yesterday's young bush. "And if I could catch you, I could not hold you."

She edges in closer to me; she is actually standing partly in my shade now. "But you're so clever, Wesk. You know so much. Are you trying to trick me? I know you trees have thoughts so deep they could penetrate boulders."

"Hardly," I say, but I take her cue and stealthily lower my limbs as she advances toward me. She is completely inside my shade now, and perhaps I can trap her before she can retreat. "You are flattering me again, Virra. If you really thought me so wise, you would not challenge my mind."

She continues moving forward, stepping lightly over my roots; I hold them still so that she will not try to flee yet. I continue to lower my limbs, and now they are nearing the ground. She does not seem to notice, for her voice is unconcerned as she says, "We're only playing, Wesk. It's a game — surely even trees play games."

"No, never. I was taught to be serious about all things."

My branches are fully lowered now, my leaves lying flat on the ground behind her. She is trapped; she could never force her way through.

"Then I can teach you about games!" she cries, and suddenly she sprints forward, barely touching the base of my roots as she passes my trunk, her bright leaves brushing against me. She dashes on toward the edge of my shade on the other side, and though I lower the rest of my limbs as quickly as I can, she gains the sun before I can catch her.

She stands quivering as my limbs belatedly strike the ground, my branches and leaves crashing into the grass. I let them rest there as she begins to giggle. I am mortified to have been tricked so easily.

By the time I have lifted my limbs again, I have recovered some composure. Virra has ceased her laughter, but she dances back and

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forth in delight. I say, "You *were* mocking me, I see."

"No no, oh no! You *are* clever, or you could never have thought of trapping me that way when you've never played a game before! But I'm used to games, you know; so I realized what you might do."

"You are clever too, Virra, though you pretended you were not."

She notices the ruefulness in my voice, for she says quickly, "We each played tricks, but I started mine first — it was *my* game, after all. Oh, please don't be angry with me. It was a *game.*"

"Games must give more joy to those who are successful at them," I say.

"Well of *course* it's more fun to win! But it wouldn't be any fun at all if you couldn't lose." She rustles her leaves playfully at me. "I'll bet you trees never take any chances at all. You just sit there in your forest trying to stay alive. What for? It's such a waste!"

I am shaken by her words. She is right: so many of us do nothing but dream of the past while trying to live longer into the future — separating ourselves further from the time of ancient joys. It seems a paradox, yet my entire life's teachings go against what she says.

I notice that she stands directly over my longest root, and cautiously, reaching deeper into the rocky ground of the field, I extend the root until it reaches past her. I am not sure why I continue to play this game; perhaps it is to please her.

Yet I promised Querca that I would question Virra's way of wasting the sun, and if I keep her talking perhaps she will not notice that I am trying to capture her. "You should not accuse me of waste," I say, "for you burn the sun's energy each hour of each day. The sun is dying; you must know that. My family gathers its energy, and if we live for a long time we may preserve the fruit of the sun for centuries after final darkness falls."

This brings leaf-shaking laughter from Virra. "The sun may be dying, but we'll die much sooner. Does it matter what may happen centuries from now?"

I do not reply immediately; I am raising the tip of my root to the surface. She takes my silence for agreement, and goes on, "You think of the ancient past, days that are dead, and you think of the future, days that might never come. Don't you ever think of *now?*"

There is surprising passion in her speech. While her attention is distracted, I break the icy ground silently with my root and suddenly reach to grasp her slender trunk. At the last moment she sees me reaching for her and tries to spring away, but I grasp and hold her tightly. She writhes in my grip, but I am too

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strong for her; and she cannot tear away from her main body.

After a minute she subsides, though I continue to hold her fast. In the silence that follows I say, "We are capable of thinking of now. As you see."

Quietly she says, "All right, you've caught me. You *are* clever, Wesk, just as I said. This time you've won; now let me go."

"No. I shall continue to hold you, and in this way I shall remain the victor."

Her body trembles with pent energy; I feel that I am holding life trapped forever. But abruptly the tension is gone, as she relaxes completely. "You really don't know anything at all about games, do you?" she says. "You can't win just by holding on to something. If you could, you might as well chase rocks."

She says no more. I continue to hold her but she does not try to move. Eventually I loose my grip and withdraw my root into the cold ground.

I feel suddenly morose. "Then what use is victory? Time eats everything, it seems; the past is a monster that follows us everywhere."

Her voice is gentle: "You're right — our past is enormous, greater than anything in the world. But while we keep moving, it can't reach us."

"Then we can only run away from it." The thought is ice reaching down to my roots.

But again her mood changes. "Oh, no, Wesk, we can move in so many ways that aren't running! Let me show you!"

She begins to dance. I have seen her do it before, the graceful motions of roots and limbs, leaves swaying without wind; when she walked through my forest-family she moved like this. I recognized it as something wonderful then, and perhaps it was this that caused me to follow her so far. She dances in a circle around me and I watch in awe; gradually I begin to notice patterns in her movements, repeated figures, slight dippings of her branches and even a kind of sound among her leaves that is rustling but more than that — is she singing with her body?

She returns to the point where she began her dance, and pauses. "You see? I'm back here again, but the past is gone; it's chasing me, but it will never catch up."

My branches feel as though they are swaying, though I can feel that they are still. The winds of the field seem warm. "You are so lovely," I murmur. "Does beauty hypnotize the past, then?"

"No, it isn't like that. Don't you see, Wesk? Dancing *is* beautiful, if you want to call it that — it's happiness. Can you dance too? Oh, of

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course you can! Come dance with me, dear Wesk!"

"I cannot. I am too slow."

"You *can*. Be stately, be dignified; it doesn't matter. Just move and be happy. I'll show you."

She begins to dance again, this time in a leisurely, languorous way. Her tiny branches sway gently like those of the great sun-gatherers; her roots careess the frost-crusted soil. I watch her, and her rhythms penetrate to my heart.

Hesitantly I begin to dance too. I make a step toward her, and another step with a different root. The icy ground grips me but I ignore it; I imitate her movements. I feel foolish and clumsy, but joy spreads in me.

"There!" she says. "You see?" She turns a complete circle where she stands, leaving delicate marks where she has touched the ground. "Can you do that?"

I try; jerkily and with great effort I withdraw my roots from the ground and turn. The winds rush through my branches, confusing me because they seem to come from all directions at once. I have to stop then, for I am exhausted and overcome by vertigo; I sink one long root directly down into the soil for strength, hoping she will not notice.

I find that I am laughing. It is an utterly strange feeling, yet delicious. The ground around me trembles and the surface ice cracks in a thousand tiny lines.

"You *can* dance! I knew you could!" Virra's branches raise into the air; the emerald light of her leaves is silhouetted by the deepening red of the late-afternoon sky.

"But not for long," I say faintly.

"Oh, yes! You can dance whenever you want, and for as long as you want!"

She is wrong. I am no bush who can drink surface frost and store sunlight in my leaves. My roots ache and bleed, and I can no longer hold my branches up to the sun. I stand motionless; I am finished, and the winds become cold again.

Virra sees the way my limbs bend, and she ceases her dance. The sun is almost set; I could gather no more energy from it anyway. She moves to me, stepping as lightly as ever past my roots. I sink them into the ground to allow her easier passage, then continue to reach for the warmer earth beneath the surface. Soon I am deeply rooted, and the sun is completely gone, and Virra stands at the very base of my roots, her small branches wrapped around my trunk.

"You're very brave," she says. "I didn't know trees could still be brave."

I feel her roots reaching down into the soil and wrapping around one of mine; they feel warm.

"I can dance," I say in wonder.

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"Though I know I do it badly."

"You'll get better when you've practiced a while."

The night is freezing cold. "If I do more, it will bring me to death," I tell her.

Her leaves are the only spots of light left. She keeps them wrapped around me and I catch what energy I can from them. Is she deliberately feeding me? My family would call it madness.

"I'd never cause you to die," she says softly.

Exhaustion and cold are sending me inexorably into sleep, but I manage to say, "I love you."

Then I do fall asleep, and I know nothing more till late the next morning, when I wake slowly and raise my limbs to the sun, and move my roots as I begin to loosen the frozen earth, and discover that Virra is gone.

At first I wait patiently for her to return, convinced that she has merely gone off on some unpredictable bush-whim. Perhaps she has; but she does not come back, though I stand rooted and drinking, spreading my limbs and gathering energy to dance again if she wishes. The red disk of the sun reaches zenith and begins to descend; I am anxious now but I remain where she left me. In a way I am grateful to have this time to mend and grow strong again. I remember her laughter, and the way she danced and played with me, and at times it seems I am dreaming.

When the sun sets I lower my limbs, drawing them in as close to me as I can, holding what warmth I have for as long as I can. In the dark, still watching for her, I begin to remember things she said:

Am I as beautiful as you dreamed? ... But you're so *serious!* Don't you know you mustn't be serious with bushes? ... You can't win just by holding on to something. If you could, you might as well chase rocks.

I watch for the light of her leaves, but she does not come. The night grows colder, and I sleep.

In the morning I wake early, and see a bush nearby. The sun's light is still dim, but I see tiny glowing leaves. "You've come back!" I cry.

"No."

That one word chills me more than ice, for it is not her voice.

"I've never seen you before," the bush says. "What are you doing so far out here? You're a tree!"

Without knowing why, I exploded with anger at this ... accusation. "Trees own the world! We are the final product of all history, the greatest of creatures!" I tremble so violently that ice shards fall from my limbs and the ground is shattered around me.

The bush moves quickly away from me. "You're as ridiculous as

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the rest. How did you get here?"

"I walked! Trees can walk — we can even dance. We can do anything!" My blood is rising now, filling my trunk and limbs; it brings pain even as the night frost falls away. I shake my leaves at the bush, though it is not wholly a voluntary act.

The bush laughs at me. It is the size of Virra; it is even female like her. But its laughter holds ridicule. "If you can dance, then show me. Oh, I'd love to see you dance! Will boulders dance next?"

"I dance only for Virra." My voice is as cold as the morning wind.

"*I'm* Virra. Dance for me."

Enraged, I try to leap after the bush, lifting three roots at once from the ground and flailing clumsily. Rocks and wedges of ice fly through the air. The bush retreats further, and I am caught by my remaining roots, which are sunk so deep that I must pause to work them loose.

"Is that what you call dancing?"

I stretch my free roots toward her, but she is too far away. I would grasp and rend her, strip her leaves, smother her with my own and gather ice from the ground to heap upon her.

"You are *not* Virra! Where is she?" But my voice cannot rumble and threaten as I want: it pleads.

The bush laughs again. "Of course I'm Virra. We're all Virra."

Something touches me that is not frost, but it is cold. The young bush I first met said he was Virra too. "What do you mean?" I ask, still struggling to free my deep-sunk roots.

She stands oddly still, and her voice is softer when she speaks again. "You don't know, do you? *All* the bushes are called Virra — why should we care about names?"

I am bewildered, though something in me says I should have known this. The bushes live so briefly; they move around so that they have no ground of their own; they hold on to nothing, not even names.

Not even to love. Least of all to loving me.

I force myself to speak: "There was one of you who came to me and gave me joy. But she went away, and I have to find her."

The winds of the field continue to rush by us. The bush asks, "How long ago?"

"Two days. Less."

The emerald glow of this person's leaves is as bright as Virra's — the real Virra's. "Then you'll never catch up to her."

Even the voice of this Virra sounds like hers now. It is an unreal world here in the great open field; nothing is as it should be.

I have at last freed my remain-

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ing roots — I can walk now, but I do not know in which direction to search. Confused and fearful, I look for the tiny root-tracks Virra must have left. But the ground is covered with frost.

Hopelessly I say, "You must know where Virra went. Tell me."

"How could I know? I don't even know which Virra you mean; we're alike to each other." She hesitates, seeing my leaves shake. "Anyway, she must have gone so far by now that you'll never find her."

"I *will!*" The force of my cry frightens the bush, and she runs. In minutes she has disappeared over a low hillock. I watch her disappearance as though she were hope itself, for I realize that she is right: I could never overtake Virra even if I knew in what direction to go.

I hold my limbs up to the chill sun and consider my situation. I have only two chances: either Virra will return to this spot, or I must hope to find her by a blind search of the field. Neither possibility seems likely, but I must do something. So I begin.

I walk through windy fields strewn with rocks and chunks of ice. I search for Virra while the dim red sun rises and sets, rises and sets more times than I bother to count. I have no direction; I turn to left or right when hopelessness strikes me, and I continue though all I find are the mindless grasses, and rocks and empty ground, and occasionally a traveling bush.

"I search for one called Virra. Are you Virra?"

"We're all Virra."

I go on, hopeless but hoping.

Several times I return to the place where I stood when Virra left. But she is never there, and there are never any tracks except my own deep root-holes. Each time I think: She will see them if she comes, and she will be able to find me.

But she never does, and though the memory of trees is greater than that of any other beings who have lived, I am beginning to forget what Virra was like. Bright green in her leaves, yes, but precisely what color? Her laughter rustled with life, but what was its sound?

One thing I do remember clearly. The last words Virra said to me were, "I'd never cause you to die." I believed it was a statement of love, but it must have been something else.

It was high summer when I left my family, but I can feel the ground growing cold at deeper levels as the sun dims toward winter. Walking is harder each day, yet I continue. My roots have become tough, lacerated by stones but covered now with something that is almost bark. I move ever more slowly.

One day I find myself at the edge of the forest-family. The her-

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mits stand silent and I do not disturb them; perhaps they are already in their winter sleep. Beyond them is darkness, and the warmth of hundreds of my family huddled together. I recall how the ground moves within the family, stirred constantly by our roots.

I look once more at the great empty field, filled with winds and strangers. My soul is utterly silent as I step carefully into the shade of an unmoving hermit, skirt her roots and move on into the forest. I step painfully from one patch of sun to another; the trees grow more numerous and closer together, and after a while I begin to hear their vague dreams, but I ignore them.

Then a voice comes: "Well. Did you find her?"

It is Querca, who promised she would remember me when I came again. Aged and great Querca, who once filled me with fear. Now I feel nothing.

"Yes, I found her."

Querca's brittle leaves rustle. "A creature who kills the sun. How did she explain that?"

I stop and sink my roots deep; deliberately I drink the soil that Querca has owned since before I was born. Querca is too old to object, or perhaps it is the coming of winter that keeps her still.

"She said the sun's energy is for life, and for joy. She said we waste it if we do not use it." I feel Querca's contempt stir the ground, but before she can speak I add, "I believe she is right."

"Then why are you returning?"

There is no way to explain what happened. "I lost her," I say.

"I see. Of course."

There is silence, as there usually is in the family during winter. Finally Querca asks, "How was the soil there? Rich and soft, as it is here?"

Her words cause me to move my roots in the deep loam of the family. "There were rocks. The soil everywhere was dry beneath the ice."

"As bad as I thought," says Querca. "They will not remain much longer."

"But while they remain, they *live!*"

Querca suppresses laughter in her roots before it can reach her leaves and cause them to fall. "When the ends comes, there will be no bushes left," she says. "We shall inherit all."

Suddenly I am flooded by emotion, and it takes me several minutes to realize what it is: I feel pity for Querca.

I withdraw my roots from her soil and turn toward the field. Stepping carefully away, I say, "Then let the end come."

And now I am walking again toward the edge of the family. I shall find a place outside the forest, beyond the hermits and perhaps touching the stones of the field. If Virra — any Virra — comes to me, I shall try to dance again.

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LETTERS

F&SF FOUNDER DIES

Dear Ed Ferman:

Perhaps you have not heard that Mick McComas died on April 19th in a convalescent home in Fremont, California. He was 66 years of age and had been confined to a wheel chair after a heavy stroke for several years.

Mick attended the University of California at Berkeley where he met his wife Annette who survives him. He is also survived by one son and one grandson.

I met Mick through Tony Boucher (a classmate of his and Annette) and all three of them were members of the dramatic society at U. Cal. Berkeley.

Mick joined me as a publishers' representative in the late thirties and we were associated for many years until ill health caused his retirement.

He edited *Adventures In Time and Space* with me and wrote stories for two other (original story) science fiction anthologies I edited. He also contributed to *Astounding* and was co-founder and editor with Tony Boucher of your magazine.

He was a brilliant man who, like Boucher, suffered ill health for a good deal of his life. He will be missed.

Adventures, incidentally, is still in print after 33 years. Ballantine has just gone into a new printing at $6.95. This anthology will serve for a long time, one hopes, as a memorial to a widely respected and much loved man.

—Raymond J. Healy
North Sandwich, New Hampshire

MALZBERG ON DELANY

In my review column for the September 1976 issue I had some very blunt and negative comments on Samuel R. Delany's *Triton and Dhalgren*, comments about which I became uneasy as soon as I saw them in print and on which I've brooded off and on for almost two years now. The other day I read Delany's new essay collection, *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw*, which Berkley has brought out in trade format, and it triggers something which I really wish I had done a long time ago: I would like to apologize for those remarks and withdraw them. Publicly. In print. In the pages of the magazine which published them.

Samuel R. Delany is a serious writer, and all of his work comes from a place I know well, a place riddled with pain and pierced by the light of intention. Whether or not the two novels at issue were entirely successful is not the point ... the point is that it is appalling that another writer, myself, who also takes his work to be serious of intention and riddled with pain would attack these ambitious, serious and tormenting expressions of intention. Wrong. Very wrong.

Although I am overall satisfied with the columns I have written for *Fantasy & Science Fiction* (except for my remarks on Delany and also similarly misguided remarks about Roger Zelazny's *Damnation Alley* many, many years before that) I suspect that I will throw in the towel now. Unless I can go on special assignment doing Criticism on the Critics; this kind of thing (note my review of the Nicholls' *Science Fiction at Large* in 8/78) is harmless.

—Barry N. Malzberg
Teaneck, NJ

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ANOTHER VIEW OF CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

Greetings Baird Searles:

Your recent review "Just Another Pretty UFO" (May 1978) I find agreeable in that, yes, CE3K is only marginally SF, it is in toto utter nonsense, and the Third Coming motif has an unseemly psychology implicit in it. I would however like to give you another view from which CE3K does not appear quite so bad.

So there's no ambiguity, let me say that I enjoyed the film not because it had any great message to impart, was intellectually sophisticated, or showed any great genius. Obviously it was none of those. The best trait imparted to the film was that it was a very light-handed treatment of uforia. Consider the treatment of that ufo archetype, the police chasing a ufo. To the simple chase he adds the ufo's famous ability to fritz up electrical systems by activating the tollgates thru which the police chase the ufos. Also consider how it ends: by a police car following them off a cliff. (All in good fun since the gas tank didn't explode, and we see the cliff goes down at a safe angle. Note the film's avoidance of violence by the army by using a sleep gas later on as well.)

Note also how Spielberg plays on your expectations in places. In the opening scene, after surprising us by the sudden appearance of light on the screen, we see two lights moving across the yellow background. The first reaction is ooooo! Saucers! But, no! It's jeep headlights. Then at the railroad crossing the lights which appear behind Neary's truck fool us again by being car headlights. The first time. Next set of lights look like car lights again, and though we suspect it is a ufo we are left unsure until we see them creeping upwards. Later we get a great surprise again when a brilliant light which ufo spotters view with religious awe turns out to be a helicopter.

There are also those light-hearted moments when the ufo press conference is upstaged by a bigfoot story, when Neary is fretridged by the ufos and his wife says "I think I'm taking this rather well, don't you?" , when the ufo plays "Is this live or is this Memorex?" with an observation tower when playing Dueling Stranjoes, and that ludicrous, naive "Einstein was probably one of them." The point I'm leading up to is CE3K avoided the dreary plotboiling which can be seen in miles of other science fiction films by not taking the subject overseriously.

You may be right when saying CE3K boils down to "I Went For A Ride In A Flying Saucer" but by boiling it down you lose some of the flavoring and texture which Spielberg cared enough to put in.

One other good trait about CE3K is that the aliens in it were at least benevolent, which you couldn't say about Earth vs. the Flying Saucers. (I didn't forget it. How could one forget Harryhausen?) They weren't terribly awesome like Gort either. The only thing to give one pause is the gratuitous horror attached to Barry's kidnapping, but even that is largely negated by Barry's curiosity with the strange machinations of the aliens. One almost wonders if the omniweirde aliens wish they had read the Ransom of Red Chief in returning him at the end.

As every thoughtful critic (Asimov, Gardner, yourself, and myself) has noted, the alien's actions make no sense. They are irrational, absurd, inconsistent, and over-contrived. The only aliens worse in this regard were some varieties of Space 1999. (Together now. UUgggh!) If it weren't for a well-

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publicized piece of information one could feel that Spielberg is not a coherent thinker, and that is why his aliens make no sense. That datum was that his ufo consultant was Allen Hynek. Hynek would certainly tell Spielberg about a school of thought in ufology which increasingly accepts a descriptive premise about the ufo phenomenon: ufos are part of a historical continuum of phenomena which manifest themselves in palpably absurd ways. This element of absurdity is fundamental to the phenomenon, it is believed. Not only do ufos make no sense, they aren't supposed to.

If you are aware of this avant-garde ufology, you would know that ufos are considered to be descendents of fairies and the deviltry of yore and maybe the spirits of mediums as well. It is something of the ideal solution since it puts things skeptics can't explain under the same umbrella. This tactic explains away the whole trouble of ufos hiding in isolated spots, flitting about, chasing cars, abducting humans ... things extraterrestrials wouldn't be likely to do.

That Spielberg is aware of this avant-garde ufology is indicated by his French speaking ufologist in the movie, who is doubtless inspired by French avant-garde ufologist Jacques Vallee. Vallee explored the parallels between fairy lore and ufos in his *Passport to Magonia*. The red tinkerbell of the movie is doubtless obliquely inspired by another new wave ufologist, John Keel, who has suggested ufo-demonology parallels. The fact that we see the Mother Ship ascending from behind Devil's Tower instead of descending from the heavens may be there to avoid certainty that the aliens have origins extraterrestrial. Keel suggests ultra-terrestrial. The idiotic statement about Einstein being one of them is likewise suggestive of the dumb things attributed by contactees of what the aliens says. Spielberg probably turned things around for irony.

Given the springboard of avant-garde ufology, Spielberg doubtless felt free to let the aliens do the absurd things they did in the movie. Indeed it would be contrary to current wisdom if they made sense. I freely admit I am only guessing that this is what Spielberg was thinking however. It is possible that absurdity in CE3K is an artifact of a Space 1999ish mentality. But even if it is an accident one must acknowledge that CE3K is fittingly a good reflection of the present vision to be seen in current ufology.

Please take note that I am bringing all this up because I think it lends a bit of appreciation for the film. I do not take ufology to be a serious field of study for myself but rather get a primitive sort of entertainment from following the ufo literature. My intellectual posture is essentially Klass, second class. I think the naturalistic and hoax scheme of explanation is almost certainly the correct one. Extraterrestrials would act differently I feel.

Ah well, I love your reviews and I hope some more good films come your way in time. From where? Beats me.

—Martin S. Kottmeyer
Carlyle, Illinois

Baird Searles replies

I will certainly concede that Close Encounters *could well be enjoyed on the level Mr. Kottmeyer suggests so intelligently. Sometimes a critic can take his duties of interpretation so seriously that he misses all the fun.*

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